25¢

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

FEB.

15 STORIES

25 CENTS

A NOVEL OF GUN-SWEPT TRAILS

DEATH RODS THIS ROUNDUP

by GIFF CHESHIRE

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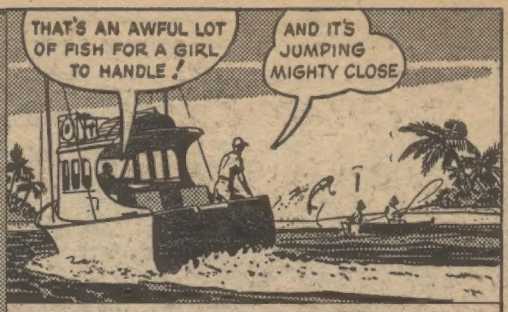
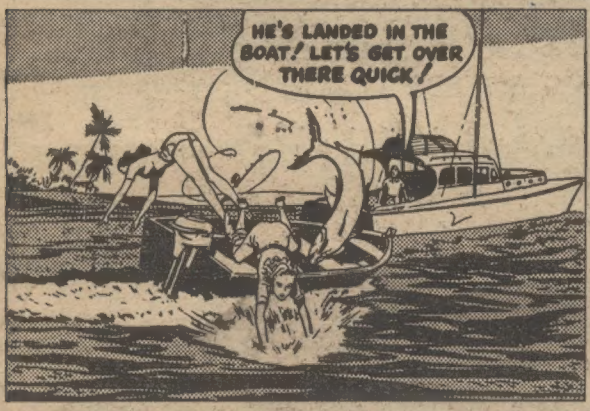


JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .



NEXT ISSUE OUT MARCH 7th!

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES — 25 CENTS

VOLUME 23, No. 4 — FEBRUARY, 1951

THREE BIG NOVELS

1. **DEATH RODS THIS ROUNDUP** ..... *Giff Cheshire* 16
They were sons of death and they rode like death—the two brothers from hell who'd sworn to walk in their father's image—one from the other's grave!

2. **SUDDEN SIX CROSSING** ..... *Marvin De Vries* 54
There's two things a man doesn't brag about—a stolen horse, or a gun that's for sale—but Red Spero parlayed them both into—something to die for!

3. **BUTCHER McCARTHY'S BOY** ..... *Frank Bonham* 86
"You're the son of Butcher McCarthy—an' a traitor, just like your dad!"

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Smashing Western Fiction

4. **LONG SLEEP FOR TWO KNIVES** ..... *William Heuman* 36
They made a song about the disgrace of Two Knives—and Two Knives knew it would live after him, shaming his memory, for the path to honor led where no Blackfoot had ever been—save in death!

5. **BULLETS BET A BLUE CHIP** ..... *James Charles Lynch* 45
Not many men can gamble their lives—and lose—and still have enough left for another deal!

6. **THE ROUGH STRING** ..... *Lewis B. Patten* 65
Some die of fear, some kill for it—and some ride it out to the last bitter showdown—win, lose—or fight!

7. **LAST BULLET RANGE** ..... *Ray Townsend* 70
"Our blood runs the same, son, but when you step in my boots you'll find they'll stand and fight!"

8. **TRIGGER TIME** ..... *David Crewe* 80
For living or dying this was Beau Bangor's town—a town that would let him do anything—except ride out alive!

Departments and Features

9. **ON THE TRAIL** ..... Death tally ..... *The Editors* 6
10. **DEAD OR ALIVE—** ..... Badman preferred ..... *M. Kane* 12
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On The Trail

LIGHT down, gents, and join in our regular session of story swapping which appears in this space each issue. If you've ever wondered what started all the Western legends that you hear about, all the well nigh impossible tales of fabulous people who did fantastic things as soon as they got loose from the East, then you've come to the right spot to find out. For *On The Trail* is reserved for the bits of Western lore and the stories of real people of the Old West that you readers send in to us, and once you get an idea of the kind of people it took to match the wild country and best it, then it's a good deal easier to see how the fiction of the Old West got that way.

Let's get the drive going now with some sidelights on one of the most famous frontiersmen of all—Kit Carson:

Dear Editor:

Kit Carson, the Indian scout, drove brass tacks in his gun barrel whenever he killed a man—evidently feeling that a man who wasn't worth keeping alive wasn't worth cutting into good gun wood for. There never got to be more than eighteen tacks in Kit's old mountain man's rifle. After that, he thought it better to lose count.

(Continued on page 8)

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And think of the opportunities in Television! In 1949 almost 3,000,000 Television sets were sold. By 1954 authorities estimate 20,000,000 Television sets will be in use. 100 Television Stations are now operating, with experts predicting 1,000. Now is the time to get in line for success and a bright future in America's fast growing industry. Be a Radio-Television Technician.

I TRAINED THESE MEN

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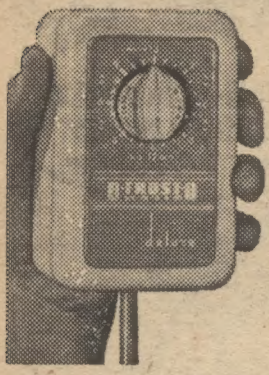

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Name.....

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City..... State.....

(Continued from page 6)

This free and easy method of tally caught up with him, however, the first time he had dealings with the United States government. For two years' service with General Fremont, the first American to make an official survey of the Rocky Mountains and California, Kit Carson received one of the strangest awards this country has ever given. Because of Carson, Americans first crossed the Mississippi as settlers instead of adventurers. Because of Carson, it is the American flag and not another that flies today over Oregon, Utah, Nevada. Congress, aware of his role, even in the 1840's, deliberated for months as to some fittting recognition—finally decided he was "beyond price"—and gave him nothing!

And even when he died, there had to be makeshift honors paid him at his funeral. It was too early in the year for flowers to bloom in Colorado. No wreaths arrived from more southerly parts of the inland empire he had staked for his country.

But the ladies of the army post at Fort Lyon, the scene of his demise, did the best they could.

They took the artificial flowers from their hats—it was the best they could do—to decorate the grave of a hero.

Larry Marshall
Las Vegas, Nevada

And here's an account of an occasion when Virginia City got the well-known bird—boomtown style:

Dear Editor:

To such heights did culture rise in Virginia City, Nevada, during the height of the silver boom, that a really affluent miner had to use a little imagination before he could be considered impressive. To pave a sidewalk with silver was considered old stuff—and serving imported pheasants on solid gold plates was just something you did on weekdays.

As always, a touch of taste and restraint—the merest touch, of course—provided possibly the most dazzling social note of the town's brief halcyon era. At a dance given in the armory, the chief decoration and musical score was furnished by a crowd of canaries, brought to Nevada specifically for the occasion. Upon arrival, they had been kept in a dark cellar for a few days. The lights of the armory the night of the dance furnished their first visibility since their long trip. Accordingly, they all sang in chorus, as though at the morning of creation, until dawn's early light, drowning out the dance music—and any rash conversation that might have started among guests.

It is said that this one touch of planning

(Continued on page 10)

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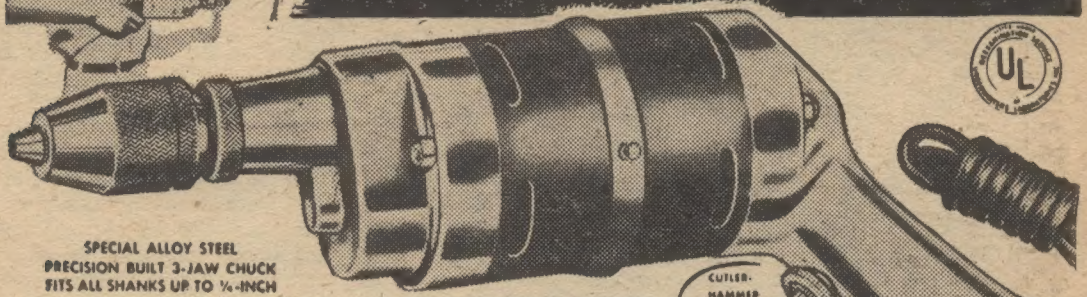

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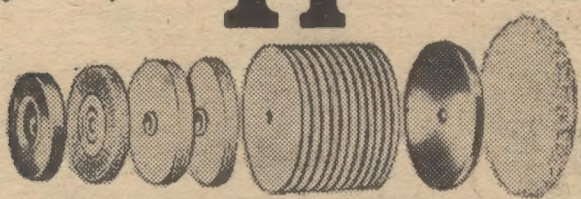

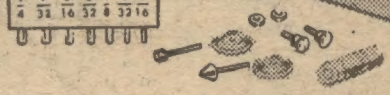

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(Continued from page 8)

completely overshadowed more ostentatious events in the boomtown's social life. However, no one knows what the first comments of the guests could have been—no one could hear a human voice that night within twenty feet of the armory. It was all canaries.

Bob Radbourne
Chicago, Illinois

Here's another Sam Houston legend:

Dear Editor:

Sam Houston, the Texas hero, had his own name among the Indians, who admired him as big medicine.

The name was Oo-tse-tee Ar-dee-tah-skee. Although the Cherokees used it with affection and respect, it suffers in translation. It means Big Drunk.

Corey Lessing
San Antonio, Texas

Here's to the ladies, bless 'em!

Dear Editor:

The East, ever concerned with the growing West, organized various uplift societies from time to time, to purify the tone of the new region. Early in the nineteenth century, people were just beginning to understand that there were wealth and power beyond the rivers, and that it would take cash money to operate out there, even for good.

The name of the first outfit, therefore, to raise funds to reform the West, was the Female Cent Society of New Hampshire. The term meant exactly what it says. Every female who belonged to it contributed one cent a month to the advancement of the cause.

There is not much trace of the Society's workings in Western saga, but who knows? Some bullets may well have gone unshot that would otherwise have done harm, due to the work of the female cents of N.H.

Josh Manning
Concord, New Hampshire

Which brings us to the end of the trail for this time, gents. We hope you enjoy these stories as much as we enjoy bringing them to you. If you know of some incident in the true history of the Old West that you think other readers would enjoy, follow the lead of your trailmates and send it along to us, won't you?

Until we meet at trailside again, *adios amigos!*

—THE EDITORS

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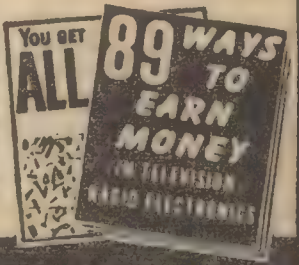

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(Continued on page 14)

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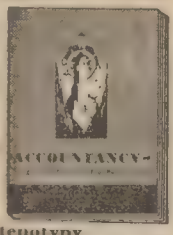

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(Continued from page 12)

rip-roaring peak, but it felt tender toward Jack.

One day, while Jack was on duty, in a manner of speaking, he encountered a Miss Caselton, who was entering town on the stage with her troupe of dancing girls. Jack and his gallant men insisted on entertaining the ladies, then and there, with a champagne picnic. The champagne came from a consignment on the coach, but the gallantry was Jack Harris' own.

It was the end—or almost the end—of the doomed bandit. A short time later, he disbanded his men, Miss Caselton quit the dancehall business, and the pair of them married and quit champagne. It was a gloomy hour for Virginia City.

There is a postscript. A few years later, respectable Jack Harris heard a stranger in town sneering at the whole tradition of stagecoach banditry. Last decade's badmen, he allowed, wouldn't stand a show against the railroads that had replaced earlier means of travel.

Jack got so mad he saw masks before his eyes. Without a word to the stranger, he rounded up his old gang and told them their dishonor was at stake.

They understood. Though all of them had proper roots in the community now, they oiled their old guns and rode. In the afternoon daylight of November first, 1870—they didn't want to take chances on not being seen—they held up the Overland Express of the Central Pacific, just outside Virginia City.

And then, as though the years had not passed, they raced the train back to town, and blew the whole take on champagne for all. A few days later, reward dodgers appeared everywhere, offering a total of $30,000 for Jack and his gang.

Odd as it seems, the reward dodgers might as well have been for thirty cents. Everyone knew it was Jack and his men who'd held up the train—but only an unthinkable boor would have suggested arresting him for it. Virginia City loved him.

He never obliged them again. He had proved he could rob a train—and by the time they invented airplanes, he was just too old to set another record.

He died with his boots off, in bed, a respected, diligent patriarch who had never said no to a dare.

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DEATH RODS THIS ROUNDUP

It seemed only a second before he heard the bark of the gun. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Rangelord's Law

TURK ORMANDY still sat his horse, though Sandra had dismounted. Her last name was Dew, and Turk was only her foster father. Turk was scowling, and it wasn't the first time his expression had changed when Sandra's affections showed in her eyes. It looked like the old warthog was jealous.

Sandra's face never failed to reflect her liking for Fishhook's spacious headquarters, and Jeremy Jory always noticed it with satisfaction. Hornet, where she lived with Turk, was the second largest spread in The Triangle, but Jeremy knew she would rather live here. But she was not given to showing her feelings.

Older than Jeremy, the rambling house squatted in a mixed stand of locusts and cottonwoods on a bench above the river. The look of steady care lay upon it. All about lay the countless acres of good grass which for a generation had gone into superior beef. It took a man's eye and would take a woman's more, though no woman had ever lived in Fishhook.

"It's about roundup time," Turk was saying. "Cash always run the wagon and set the date, but this year it's diflerent."

"I reckon," Jeremy said. "Turk, you'd better take over for Cash."

Turk grinned and shook his head. "The spread that runs the chuck wagon has got to feed the crew. Being roundup boss ain't worth that much to me. I figured I'd better ride over, though, and we'd talk it up. To my mind it ought to ride the way it used to be. You and Jace can flip a dollar, or let Brig Gillray run the shebang."

"Too bad they're not around," Jeremy said. "Brig had something up in the north corner he wanted Jace to look at. You set the date, Turk, and I'll talk it over with them."

"We could be ready a week from Monday," Turk said.

"I reckon we could, too. We'll have our wagon and cavvy down at the south corral. We'll organize then. It don't look like we could improve much on the way Cash always run it."

"We sure couldn't," Turk said, and he turned his horse, a thin, stooped and graying figure in the saddle. He had been close-mouthed about Cash ever since the tragedy, and Jeremy knew this came from a repressed grief like his own. Cash and Turk had ventured West together and taken up the Triangle and built the biggest cattle layouts in the country. They had done more than that in the small, deep things that mean friendship. The renegade bull that had gored Cash had run a horn through Turk Ormandy as well.

Sandra Dew swung reluctantly to the saddle, lacking her foster father's quick changes in action. She let Turk ride off, then said in a soft voice, "It hurts you to be reminded, doesn't it?"

"That Cash is gone or that the year's about up?"

"Both, I guess. I don't see how you could keep from worrying."

He shrugged. "Why worry?"

"I think you cared more for Cash than Jace did. At least it seemed so to me. To—be denied by Cash would be pretty bad for you."

His laugh was quick, impatient. "He halfway denied me all my life, anyhow. If he's going to point the finger at Jace, it suits me."

"I'm hoping for you, Jeremy." Sandra gave him a quick, soft smile.

He watched her ride out with a black frown on his wide, sun-browned forehead. He had loved her from the time they were around ten—neither ever knowing their exact ages because of the strange way they, with Jace, had appeared here on these adjoining cattle spreads. Sandra had always leaned to him a little, Jeremy thought, but now Jace was growing interested in her too. And Jace had a way of getting what he wanted.

Jeremy walked down to the day corral and saddled a horse. Except for the cook and Claude, the old retainer held over from Cash's early days in the Triangle, headquarters were deserted. The horse Jeremy mounted was one of the best from a band of prime mounts, and it took him out of the ranchyard at a thunderous pound. The rider swung it toward the section they called "The Point," a wedging area between two rivers, because it was his private claim upon Fishhook's farflung grazing lands. He rarely let a day pass without visiting the little herd there under his own brand. It was because of it that he had been depressed by the reminder that Cash Jory's will would soon be opened and read, that it would then be determined whether Jason or Jeremy had been accepted by Cash as his real son.

Jeremy swung first toward the strip of marshland that hung along the upper river. Once it had been swampy and a trap for cattle. Cash had drained it in his early days, but since there were scattered, never-drying quicksand sinks in the area, it was under fence. Even so, the fence had a way of getting itself broken.

He spotted the first of his widely grazing steers and pulled down his horse for a moment to grin at them. Cash had spotted him and Jace to a hundred head apiece on what was assumed to be their twenty-first birthday, and had told them to make cowmen of themselves. Four years back.

JEREMY had ridden half around the fence when he found a new break. It was at an anchor post, and two strands of barbed wire were down and sprung back. They were not newly cut, but old ends that seemed to have pulled from under the staples as if from too much tension or some weight that had been on them. Jeremy dismounted and stepped over the remaining strand. He saw the tracks where three or four steers had made an easy leap, attracted by the lush marsh grass fenced off from them. He followed the tracks with eyes that showed a mounting temper. At some distance, within a tall stand of grass, cane and rushes, the tracks ended. The story they told put mixed anger and distress in Jeremy. Ahead was the sinister mass of a quicksand trap.

He thought, *The scheming son. He can't take an open chance with me. He's got to make sure.* He swung around and returned in long strides to his horse. Fences were always breaking down, particularly when they were as old as this one. Each time it had happened, there had been something to make him certain the break had been arranged, while there had also been something to make him doubt it enough to hold his tongue. Jace had jeered at the losses, asking why in thunderation he had picked that section anyhow.

A closer look showed Jeremy that something had been used to loosen the staples holding the wire to the fence post. He searched the ground, and was not surprised that there were no telltale tracks. An intelligent man on a job like this would brush them out. Jeremy mounted and rode around the marsh, and on the far side found what he had wanted.

Someone had left a horse and crawled through the fence to cross the marsh on foot, never expecting the full length of the fenceline to be searched for sign. Though the shifting tracks of the waiting horse showed nothing of importance, there was a thing that told Jeremy the whole story. Brig Gillray was Cash's ramrod, and had been designated to run the ranch until the will was opened. He was an inveterate smoker. It was his habit to roll and light a cigarette before mounting to ride out. He was given to the use of thin sulphur block matches, and one of these lay on the ground, broken in a rangeman's unconscious guard against grass fire. Jeremy whipped his horse around and started the long ride back to headquarters.

When he saw the sweated horses Jace and Gillray had turned into the corral, he told himself coldly, *Now don't go jumping Brig. What he's done has been for Jace. They take to each other.* He put up his horse with slow patience, trying to get a hold on his temper. Crossing the ranchyard, he saw Gillray at the bunkhouse wash bench. The man was around thirty, tall and wide-shouldered. He knew cattle and he knew his work, or Cash Jory never would have hired him. And he knew which side his bread was buttered on, whether or not Cash had realized it. If he saw Jeremy now, Gillray gave no sign. He was bending over a tin basin and lifting soapy water to scrub his face and neck. It seemed a matter of studied indifference.

Jeremy walked into the small structure that served as the ranch office. Jace was at Cash's old desk, and had a proprietary air about him as he sat in the swivel chair. He had an open tally book before him, not a part of Fishhook's account but his own, covering his carefully husbanded little bunch. He had never lost a steer or calf.

He was smaller than Jeremy, lean and wiry. Since the male kin of Cash's murdered wife had been built much the same way, that was one reason Cash had assumed that Jace might be his son. But there were other things to support that assumption. Jeremy wondered if Cash had ever noticed the countless ways in which, from boyhood, Jace had imitated him, practicing the man's ways and mannerisms until they were habits.

Like this gentle turning in the swivel chair just to make it squeak, an indulgence that had kept Cash from oiling the mechanism. Like that frown of annoyance at being interrupted. That was Cash all over again.

Jeremy looked at his foster brother and said, "I've lost some more steers. Bogged."

Jace leaned back in the chair and steepled his fingers, and that had been one of Cash's mannerisms. No surprise showed on his face, and Cash too had had features of granite. "You had your pick, kid, the same as I did." Jace had affected the "kid" from the start, though there was no telling which was the older. "And you were fool enough to take that point section."

Jeremy scowled. "It's the best on the spread when the fences stay up."

"But they don't seem to stay up, do they?"

"Not when somebody opens them."

The stiffening that ran through Jason betrayed him. *He knows all about it,* Jeremy thought, and he felt his anger rise again. Cash would have done better there, and wouldn't have batted an eye.

"At the end of roundup," Jeremy said, "they'll open the will. We never talked about it, but I reckon it's been on your mind as much as mine. Cash left that letter saying he'd never been able to decide who to regard as his real son. He arranged so the will wouldn't be opened until a year after his death. You and me figure we know the reason why."

Jace's face had darkened. "I've given it no thought."

Jeremy laughed. "Have you thought about anything else, Jace? It was pretty plain when Cash spotted us to a hundred starters, back there, that he wanted to see who could do the best with them. It was a fact that we couldn't both be his sons. Cash fixed it so we'd start under the kind of conditions he did. It looks like he figured his blood would show up in the best cowman."

A nervous tongue wet Jace's lips, then he said, "I don't know what you're driving at, Buck."

"I want to have things plain from here out," Jeremy retorted. "The letter Cash left to be opened if he died showed he knew all along how we've hated each other. It said he knew we'd never make a go of running Fishhook as partners, and he didn't want it split up between us. So he left the spread in charge of Brig Gillray till the will's read. It looks like one of us will get Fishhook then, and the other his walking papers. You made up your mind who would be which the day we read that letter."

Jace's voice was harsh. "I still don't know what you're trying to say."

"Only that you and Brig Gillray had better lay off my stuff. I'm not blind and I don't think I'm stupid. Everything has happened to my starter cut the past four years, and nothing out of the way has happened to yours. That always seemed to please Cash, but he never knew what I did. All your life you've done everything to blacken me in his sight. There were all kinds of things I did to help you, the way brothers do for each other. You never returned 'em, and you never appreciated 'em."

Jace slapped the desk with the flats of his hands. He was a set, driving man and he showed no fear. He said, "If you think I'll take talk like that, you're crazy."

Jeremy grinned at him. He stood higher, with considerable more heft, and in the few times they had fought in their rivalry-filled lives he had won. "Let your hackles down, Jace," he said. "Even if you figure I might try it, you know I couldn't prove how you've been working against me."

For a moment they stared at each other, foster brothers whose lives had been filled with hatred. . . .

EVENING lay upon Twin Rivers when Jeremy rode into the town. Since he had left Fishhook impulsively and without his supper, he was hungry. He swung down before the restaurant and racked his horse. At this hour the place was empty when he stepped inside, and he saw Binty Lord look searchingly through the window that gave into the kitchen from the main room. She smiled, then dried her hands hastily and disappeared to emerge through the door from that room.

"Well, hello," she said, "I wasn't expecting to see you very soon. Isn't it about roundup time?"

"Getting close," Jeremy said, and he smiled at her. "We'll start Monday, probably. Better come along." He knew how she would miss roundup, this tomboy who had been forced to work in town because one of the nicest cattle outfits outside the Triangle had gone stone broke a year back.

"I'd like to," Binty said. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head. "Just want something to nibble on. A steak and some potatoes. A loaf of bread and a pot of coffee. A pie."

"A whole pie?"

"Including the smell."

He watched her disappear again, glad that he had got the impulse to see her. Binty Lord was tall and slim and dark, a pretty girl whose full face and warm mouth were stirring to a man who had lived all his life in a house without women. He recalled that it once looked like Binty would move onto Fishhook as Jace's bride. Jace had courted her, and it had been obvious that he had won her. But that was before Hump Lord, her father, had gone clean broke in a debt-laden off year. After that Jace had taken a shine to Sandra Dew.

When Binty had brought the meal, she

lingered beyond the counter, watching him, then she surprised him by saying, "The year will be up right after roundup, won't it? And you'll know."

"Yeah. Another couple-three weeks. Cash was shifting the herd for winter when he got sat down afoot and a ringy bull caught him without his gun."

A frown darkened Rinty's face. "It doesn't seem fair, the way he left things. Why couldn't he have treated you both as his sons and let you be joint heirs? It looks like he didn't trust either one of you."

"Just one of us," Jeremy said. "If anybody knew Jace and me could never get along, Cash did."

"He took you both in. He gave you both his name."

"But in his heart he hungered to know which was his boy. He left a wife and baby behind when he came West to get his start. It must have been a long and lonesome wait before he could send for them. And it must have hit hard when he learned the Piutes had got the stage they were coming on."

"With your mother murdered."

Jeremy frowned. "Now, you've always put it that way, Binty. But there's no saying it was my mother. Mine was on that stage, but there's no knowing if she was Cash's wife. They found three dead women among the passengers. It was weeks before the army run down the Piutes and found three white young 'uns in the village. All were about the age of Cash's boy and off that stage. Jace, Sandra and me."

Binty nodded. "I know. It's one of the stories that're told a lot because it's so odd. And everybody's curious to know what the will is going to do about it."

"It'll be Jace. I always knew that Cash figured that way in his heart. Cash said his wife's kin were built on Jace's lines, and I didn't look like anybody he knew. Sometimes he'd say I had his own wild streak, but that's about the only likeness he ever drew between us. The needle pointed to Jace all the way."

"With Jace doing his level best to attract it."

That surprised Jeremy. It had been his conviction and his fear that she was still in love with Jace. But something in her had changed, he knew. She was beginning

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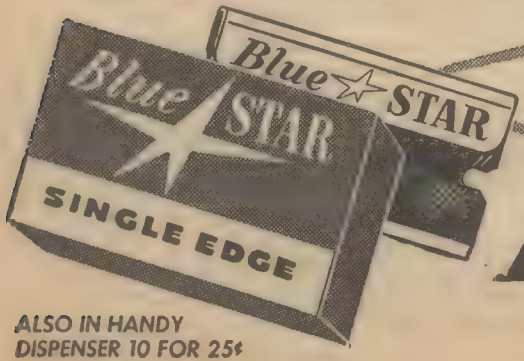

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to take a hardened attitude, not only about Jace but about everything. Hump Lord had been well-fixed, and was now working on Hornet for wages. Binty's life had once been full of hope and now there seemed little left to her but a life as a waitress in town.

But even so, he didn't like to see this cropping up in her outlook.

She was warm and sincere and meant for affection. He liked her better than any girl he had ever known, though not in the way he liked Sandra Dew.

"Jace is built that way," he said, in response to her comment. "He just can't help it."

"But you weren't built that way," Binty said, with a toss of her head. "And if Cash had had any sense he would have noticed it."

"It was hard to tell what went on in Cash."

"And in you. You boys felt insecure, but Jace more than you. He put up a fight for Cash's attention. You never did. People said that showed you had no love for Cash and that it proved you couldn't have been his boy."

"Mebbe," Jeremy said, and he tackled the pie. "Mebbe it did."

"Fiddlesticks!" Binty's voice was sharp. "The fact that you hid your feelings proves it was the other way 'round."

He smiled at her and felt better, and knew he had wanted to see her and draw this comfort from her, the way he had drawn it for as long as he could remember.

"Now, you keep your chin up," Binty added. "Cash Jory was no fool. He didn't go in for crazy capers. His wanting you to wait a year to learn his real mind had a good reason behind it. He must have given it a lot of thought."

Jeremy shrugged and didn't tell her about the starter steers he and Jace figured would be the pivot on which Cash's estate would be settled. Cash had put being a good cowman ahead of everything else, where a man had to put it to build a spread like Fishhook.

His fatherly devotion had been expressed mainly through teaching the boys his hard-earned wisdom.

Nor was Jeremy telling that to have Cash acknowledge him as his son was all he wanted, and all he had ever wanted.

CHAPTER TWO

Devil's Drive

THE FACT that he had ridden the long way to town to see Binty caused Jeremy to cross the street guiltily and enter Draper's mercantile in search of a present for Sandra. He chose a comb, brush and mirror set that Draper had just unpacked. But Hornet lay beyond Fishhook, so he would not be passing it, and he took the gift home with him.

He hadn't spoken to Jace and Gillray about the roundup because of the things that had intervened. But that had to be planned and undertaken in whatever atmosphere prevailed and regardless of what hung in the offing. Usually it was a season that pumped wild energies through Jeremy, but this time he regarded it with dread. It was partly the fact that Cash would be missing, and even more than that, it was the closeness of the time when he was apt to know for sure that Cash had rejected him.

The letter left to be opened after his death had appointed Brig Gillray to the job of running the spread in the interim. But Gillray was inclined toward diffidence with both possible heirs. Though his sympathy lay with Jace, he could not be certain who might wind up owning Fishhook. He was playing it safe, and the ranch was run largely by a series of councils between the three of them.

Thus it was that Jeremy held Jace and Gillray at the cookhouse table after the big crew had eaten and departed. He told them what Turk Ormandy had said about the roundup, and that a tentative date for its start had been agreed on.

"That's as good as any," Jace said. "But we'll run the roundup. Fishhook always has and it always will."

"That'll suit Turk," Jeremy said, and he scowled. Jace was always speaking for Fishhook in long range terms, contemptuously confident in his implication that he would have the long-run say. But he was starting to show an arrogance toward the neighbors that Cash wouldn't have allowed for a minute. *You're slipping,* Jeremy thought. *You don't plough deep enough to remind me of Cash.* Aloud he said, "I'll take a ride to Hornet and tell Turk for sure. He can spread the word around."

As he rode out, he knew that this was his excuse and not his reason. He had the gift he had brought for Sandra and he wanted to see her again, though she had been on Fishhook only yesterday.

Because he never traveled anywhere slowly, he hit out across country, sometimes skirting the obstacles in his way, sometimes riding boldly through them. At this fall season the land lay about him in a tawny heat, and the heat lay in layers in the still air, its touch drawing moisture on his face and hands. The horse's fast-striking hoofs kicked up a scarf of dust that rolled behind him.

He kept the horse thundering and soon saw Turk's headquarters below him, a small squat house in the midst of a jumbled array of outbuildings. Turk had not built for a woman as Cash had, though Sandra had come unexpectedly to live in the care of an Indian squaw. This stark utility was not a thing that would appeal to the feminine eye. Riding down upon the place, Jeremy didn't wonder that Fishhook's cool and spacious beauty struck a response in Sandra every time she was over there.

He saw no change when he came into the ranchyard, but at this hour Turk might be out on the range with his riders. It was as likely that Sandra was too, but as he swung down at the vine-shaded porch she appeared in the doorway, smiling out at him. He motioned a cheery greeting and got the present from a saddlebag, self-conscious and embarrassed about giving it to her. He tucked it lightly under his arm, pushed back his hat, and went up the path to the porch.

"We're getting chummy, aren't we?" Sandra said.

He held forth the package, because he didn't know what else to do with it. Warmth climbed in him as he watched the surprise in her face change to delight, and she exclaimed, "For me?" as women have for a million years. Then she unwrapped the package and squealed her pleasure. In the next moment she stepped to him, rose on her toes and touched a quick kiss to his lips.

He put down the feeling that had surged in him. She stood facing him, fresh and dainty in all the morning's heat, and her grey eyes were pure loveliness as she watched him.

As if by impulse, she said, "Jeremy, I do, do hope you win."

"Would it make any difference, Sandra?"

"How do you mean?"

"To you. Would you like me as well? I mean—if I didn't have anything but the little bunch Cash staked me to?"

A frown flickered for a moment on her brow. "Why, of course. But why be foolish? Who wouldn't want to own Fishhook? Jeremy, did I say something wrong?" Sandra rose on her toe, suddenly, lifting her face. This time she was still in his arms and she gave back his kiss. Then again she broke away and again laughed.

"Why don't you cough before you come around a corner, Dad?" she asked.

Jeremy swung to see Turk standing at the corner of the house, staring at them. In his eyes was that thing that had been there yesterday at Fishhook, a scowl of disapproval for what he had seen. Jeremy grinned at the man, but the heat of discomfort stood on his cheeks and he felt like a kid caught stealing jam.

Turk wore a blacksmith's apron and had obviously been in the ranch shop until now. He said, "I ain't got used to having a girl old enough to draw men like flies. Don't know if I'm glad to see you, Jeremy. Today I don't like Fishhook. You've got a man over there I'm apt to kill the next time I run into him."

Jeremy could only stare. "Who, Turk?"

"Your ramrod. Brig Gillray. He caught old Hump Lord on the range yesterday and nearly mauled the life out of him. Hump's not too old to fight his own battles, but it happens a horse fixed his back for him when that Gillray was still in knee britches. Hump won't say what it was over. Claims it was a personal matter and told me to stay out of it. Otherwise, I'd of been over by now to see Gillray."

"I'll be blamed," Jeremy said. Shame ran through him that a thing like that should have been done by a man on Fishhook's payroll. He said, "Turk, I don't know if he could even be fired the way it stands."

"Likely not," Turk said. He swung and walked off, and it was as if he was turning his back on the spread of his old friend.

Jeremy looked at Sandra. "You didn't tell me."

"I knew it would only upset you."

"There's something dirty going on that I'm only starting to find out about. I reckon I'd beter find out for sure what it is."

She placed a hand gently on his arm. "You'll win, Jeremy."

"And if I don't?"

A frown creased quickly between Sandra's eyes. "Why do you talk that way? Is it wrong of me to hope you get Fishhook? You could do wonderful things, Jeremy."

"You're ambitious."

She laughed. "Is a person ever so big he can't grow bigger? Your dad and mine built The Triangle. Why shouldn't we go on to do even bigger things?"

THAT should have cheered him. It was as close as she had ever come to committing herself to him. Yet he rode out for home with a disquiet lying too deep to be reached by thought. He had a sense of having awakened to a reality that jarred him, and it had nothing to do with Sandra. He mde the ride home in the same headlong way he had come over, thinking of Binty Lord and her crippled father and the thing Brig Gillray had done.

It might never have happened had he not chanced to ride into Fishhook's ranchyard just as the crew was emerging from the cookhouse after the noon meal. Gillray had come out with Jace and stood in the yard with tobacco and papers in his hands. He flicked Jeremy an odd stare that conveyed his curiosity as to what Jeremy had heard at Hornet. Jeremy swung down before the pair.

"Brig," he said, "you can pick a dozen reasons out of your memory. All I'm saying is that you're the lowest thing that ever walked on two legs."

Gillray's astonishment was almost painful to see, and the same shock ran over the faces of those who heard. Jace sucked in a whistling breath, staring at his brother. Gillray's mouth twitched as he stowed away his makings. Not till then did Jeremy hit him.

Gillray still hadn't brought himself to accept the situation. He went back in an increasing tilt until he crashed to the hard-tramped ground. But he rolled over instantly, shoving up. Whatever his inclinations, he had to fight, for he had been knocked flat before his crew. Acceptance of that showed in the man as, bending a little, he came forward with swinging fists.

Jeremy had his own fists clenched, and he brought one up. It sank deep into the ramrod's belly and doubled him up, twisting his face in pain. Jeremy surged in and grabbed the front of the checkered shirt Gillray wore, this with his left hand while his right went in to bruise the arch of Gillray's neck. The man kicked out, driving him back and down. But Jeremy pinned the ramrod's legs and rolled. He got to his knees as Gillray crashed. He climbed to his feet and let the man rise, and both wobbled as they glared at each other.

Gillray came in with driving fists, throwing it open, making it a slugging contest. Jeremy settled his feet and stood against it. He was driven against the wall of the cookshack and nearly nailed. He drove off the wall, coming in at Gillray, connecting with every blow. It dawned on him that he was fighting for Binty as he had in school, because of Hump but for Binty. He saw Gillray sway drunkenly, once lurching out into a space where no one stood.

There was a cool grin on Jeremy's bleeding lips when he measured the man, nailed him, watched him fall. Gillray lay like a dead man in the scuffed dust. Jeremy turned and walked toward the house, thinking, *He'll have to quit, and that'll make one less for me to watch.*

Jeremy was at breakfast with the crew when Brig Gillray came in late. He was battered, sullen, but he carried himself with a brisk arrogance that had not been there before. His entrance into the crew's dining room sent a ripple of attention along the two big tables.

Jace had not emerged from the big house, but Jeremy knew he and Gillray had spent an hour together the night before. Jeremy could see the lighted window of the ranch office from his own bedroom, and for a moment had watched Jace, seated in Cash's chair with his fingers steepled, listening while Gillray talked and gestured emphatically.

Now, instead of going to his place at the table, Gillray paused. He let attention swing toward him, then put his own gaze coldly on Jeremy.

He said, "To this point, kid, I've treated you and your brother like partners. You've taken advantage of that. It looks like you forgot that Cash Jory gave me the run of this spread. Hereafter you'll consider yourself just one of the boys and you'll take my orders, same as you always did with Cash."

Jeremy shrugged, knowing that this declaration before the crew was to save the ramrod's face, that it had been decided upon the night before between Gillray and Jace. He said, "What happened between you and me last night, Brig, had nothing to do with Fishhook, and you know it. Or am I wrong? Did it have something to do with Fishhook I haven't caught onto yet?"

Gilray stared at him. "Your first order is that you'll remember your place, kid. Which ain't to make talk like that." The ramrod took a seat on the bench, arrogance high in him, and Jeremy saw that the man had won the crew's grudging respect. What had happened had been between partners, so to speak, and not between man and boss. The outfit seemed willing to let it ride that way.

Fishhook worked to shape up for the roundup. Word was despatched to encircling spreads to send in their reps. The outfits lying north of the Triangle and forming a part of the roundup district were advised to ready their share of men.

On the last morning before the big outfit headed for the range, Gillray took stance before the crew with his thumbs hooked in his belt. He flicked a hard study from face to face and said, "You boys know Fishhook's been the big frog in the pond. This year there's been a change. Some other outfit's apt to make its bid. We won't stand for it, and it's up to you boys to remember who you work for. Fishhook will run the roundup and it will referee. And you'll see it gets the break every time the chips are down. Now let's ride."

Swallowed up in the crew of which he was now only a part, Jeremy found himself wondering uneasily about that little speech. It was something Cash had never done, and it struck Jeremy that the words had been designed to rouse an unconscious hostility in the crew. Jeremy didn't like the feel of things at all.

By the middle of the hot morning, the big roundup crew was assembled at Fishhook's south corral. This was a permanent structure remaining from Cash Jory's early days, still used from habit, though branding on the open range had elsewhere become the practice. Jeremy found himself being greeted cheerfully on very hand, though Jace and Gillray kept apart, with Fishhook's riders, turned puzzled and cautious, for the first time afraid to mix. This reserve had its quick effect upon the others, riders and reps in from a dozen farflung spreads and once Jeremy saw Turk Ormandy fling Gillray a hard and bitter stare. Hump Lord was not with Hornet's contingent.

RANCH owners formed a group by custom to elect the year's boss. It was a moment of tension, with every one of a dozen faces set and guarded and uncomfortable, the punchers scattered interestedly about this center.

Turk Ormandy spat tobacco juice and said, "Hell, this is only wasting time. To my mind one of Cash's boys had ought to take his place, with things running on like they always did. To my mind it ought to be Jace."

Surprise ran across the group, its highest in Jace and Brig Gillray. Seeing this, a jar of realization went through Jeremy. He thought, *So that's it.* Turk, Cash's oldest friend in the country, had picked Jace as Cash's replacement.

Every man in the conference nodded, thought many with visible reluctance, and it became official in that rough and simple way. With the decision made, relaxation came, and it was more like old times. A smile of satisfaction rose on Jace's thin face. He began to issue orders that Cash had always given and in the same fashion, and in this well-learned part he functioned without a flaw.

The gather really built itself with mounting momentum. The grazing steers, individually and in the small bunches into which range cattle instinctively divided, began voluntarily to move in and then to move with the drift as it became discernible. The vast procession came down from the plateaus, halting to graze or bobbling in sudden disquiet or trotting obediently forward toward the center of the circle.

Then came the moment when the roundup captain had his dramatic fulfillment. Astride a big gelding, Jace Jory rode in to set the pace while the herd was moved on to the branding corral. Watching from the dusty distance, Jeremy noted the arrogance in the thin, pulled-back shoulders. The punchers stationed themselves quietly along either side of the herd and across the drag. Then Jace rode forward, the steers at his rear instinctively following the moving horses. The herd, now an explosive mass

of wildling flesh, moved out coherently.

Jace kept the herd at a patient walk until it was close enough to the corral to hold together the rest of the way. Then, not because it was useful but because it had been one of Cash's touches, Jace lifted his horse to a trot. The speed rippled back through the herd, the mantling dust thickening. Then, with the yawning wing fences of the corral opening just ahead, Jace put the gelding to a gallop.

Behind him dust blanketed the whole mass, with only the thunderous pounding of hoofs to attest what it contained. Jace drove straight for the wing fences and at the last split second cut his horse to the right. The herd hammered on into the enclosure, with the cook and wrangler hastening to throw up the gates behind it. Now Jace allowed himself to grin, with every man in the outfit aware that, had his horse stumbled, he would have been ground to bits under thousands of cutting hoofs. He had gained their respect.

Riders, plastered with mud made of sweat and dust, swung down to grin and stretch their legs. The work was rolling, they were loosening up, and somebody called congratulations to Jace for the way the herd had been handled. Horses were unsaddled and turned out with the cavvy, where they rolled energetically. Punchers drifted to the chuck wagon to scrub up and eat their supper.

Jeremy filled a plate and moved over to the shady side of the bed wagon, where Turk Ormandy was eating. The old man glanced at him grumpily and offered no greeting.

Jeremy asked, "Did you get anything out of Hump about why him and Gillray tangled?"

"Mebbe I did and mebbe I didn't."

"Look, Turk," Jeremy said, and his voice turned cooler. "Something's going on I don't know about. If you do, it'd help me to know it."

Turk looked at him then, in a long, inscrutable stare. "What I know wouldn't help you a'tall, youngster."

"Then keep it to yourself, blast you."

Turk grinned. "Didn't say I was going to. Only said it wouldn't help you. Hump shot off his face to Gillray, I reckon."

"What over?"

Turk stared at him again. "Boy, before I'll tell you I'll have your promise to keep a dally on your temper."

"All right, you've got it."

Pivoting on his thin haunches, Turk took a casual look about to see who might be within earshot. His voice was scarcely above a whisper when he said, "Hump told me last night. A while back he tied into Jace for having trifled with his girl then throwed her over for another. He told Jace he was of a mind to gun him. It looks like that scared Jace, and he had Gillray tell Hump that if anything happened, Hump would have Gillray to deal with. That's when Hump really gave off steam. Gillway whaled the tar out of him to make his point. Behind that tough front of his, Jace Jory is as yellow as they come."

"You'll get no argument there," Jeremy said. "But how come Hump waited so long to speak his piece? Jace quit Binty a good year back, right after Hump went broke."

"And ordinarily Hump would have been too proud to say a word," Turk said. He glanced away. "But it happened that he caught Jace and my girl, out on the range. She was in his arms."

"Sandra?"

"Who else do I claim for a girl? Now hold on, boy."

"Turk, you're crazy."

"Mebbe." The old man's stare was sympathetic. "I've never learned what to expect from that girl, but I can tell you one thing. Maybe she'd rather have you, but she'll marry Jace in a minute if he gets Fishhook."

Jeremy shoved to his feet, stung with anger and disbelief. He wanted to smash his fist into Turk's face; he wanted to go after Jace the same way. What Turk said just wasn't possible. Turk was warped with jealousy of Sandra, Hump with his sympathy for Binty. Turk was lying, and Jeremy nearly said so, but he found that he couldn't do it.

CHAPTER THREE

Stampede

THE WORKING of the gather began in a hot dawn. Riders wormed through the herd cutting out other brands and cows with unbranded calves missing in the spring roundup and, mainly, Fishhook's beef cut. Dust and racket rolled over the bowl where the branding corral

stood. Away from the entrance, riders began to bunch the strays to be drifted back to home ranges. Fishhook's cutbacks were turned loose to make their own return to the graze. Under Jace's guidance it went like clockwork, the way it always had gone with Cash.

At noon Jace sent Gillray and the circle riders north for the next gather, which would be held on a bunch ground for the night. Thereafter the branding would be transferred to the open, as the roundup worked up through the Triangle and the northward-lying range.

Jeremy went out with this contingent, a fermenting temper repressed behind the casual, workaday front he wore. When the drives were bunched, he rode back to camp in late evening with half the circle crew. The day had turned sultry, and in late afternoon heat-lightning had burned at intervals in the clear brilliance of the sky. The new gather would require night herding, and the riders needed fresh horses and food. As he rode into the cow camp, Jeremy was astonished to see Sandra Dew standing before the cookfire.

He turned his horse over to the wrangler and went in to wash. He saw Sandra's attention drift across the newcomers and settle on him for an instant while she smiled. He returned it, surprised at the stiffness in his cheeks; for seeing her there in her fresh beauty, he was sure that Turk had lied. But Jace was in the group that was talking with Sandra, and Jeremy filled a plate and hunkered to eat. Once Sandra glanced curiously his way, but then Jace said something and they walked off together. Presently he saw them riding out, and it looked like Jace was going to see her part way home.

Another kind of excitement was in the crew, and now Jeremy caught the sense of it. Blackish clouds had heaped up on the northwestern horizon, and for the first time Jeremy grew aware of stirring air. An electric storm would make the night's chore a hard one, but scarcely a roundup passed without their having to undergo at least one.

Gillray assigned Turk and Jeremy to the second midnight guard. Bedded down, the herd seemed placid enough, though infrequently the lightning continued, with a distant low rumble of thunderclaps. For a while, just after dark, there had been a splattering of rain, but when he was roused to go on a nightherd, Jeremy found the atmosphere serene. He saddled and rode out with Turk, and both were strained and silent until finally Jeremy spoke.

"What fetched Sandra all the way out here?"

"Some mail come in from town she figured I'd want to see."

They relieved the preceding watch, separated and began their slow, monotonous rounds. Jeremy was on the east flank of the big gather when a jagged streak of lightning rent the northern sky. The thunderclap came almost at once, and Jeremy felt nervousness enter his horse. He soothed the impatience out of the animal, knowing that any sudden disturbance would send the cattle scattering.

He met Turk at the far end of the herd, but the old man said nothing. At the end of the round he came upon two horsemen, waiting in the distance. Jeremy pulled down his horse, staring that way. Then the riders came in at a quiet walk. Brig Gillray and a Fishhook puncher.

The ramrod's voice was scarcely more than a whisper when he said, "Figured we'd better double the guard. It looks like we might have trouble. Slim and me'll stay through this watch."

Gillray broke it off, and all of them straightened in the saddle. A gust of wind had come out of nowhere to slap against them. It slatted Jeremy's shirt and sent a shiver up his spine. In the next moment the sky opened in a jagged streak of light, with the stirring air jarred by the thunder and the smell of sulphur coming strongly to his nostrils. Silently, Jeremy started his horse and grew aware that Gillray had fallen in behind him.

The rain came in a torrential downpour. Within ten minutes Jeremy was soaked to the skin, while the ground beneath his horse's hoofs turned sloshing. The last of the herd came to its feet, and it began to weave.

Then earth and sky seemed to come together with tremendous impact. Light of dazzling whiteness ran over the land; the jar came up through the horse to Jeremy even as the thunder boomed. There had been a strike not far away, and Jeremy was aware of movement in the cattle. They were wheeling away from him and away from the point where the lightning had hit.

Jeremy dug his spurs, sending his horse forward at a sudden gallop across the slippery range.

He was wholly calm now that it had happened. He was at a quarter to his previous direction, and he kept bending in upon the flank of the running cattle, knowing that all around the herd the other riders were doing the same. It wasn't bad yet, not like when they bolted outward in all directions, for the lightning strike had given them a definite impetus. He kept riding and he kept crowding, now and then slapping out with his soggy hat or yelling, and once firing his pistol to give them a new fear to veer away from.

He was crowding into the onrushing front of the herd when he grew aware of another horse pounding up behind him. He paid no heed, for at this point he was in deep danger. The animals to his left were leading the stampede. They had to be turned, and the only way to do it was to throw a cow pony and rider toward them, heading them away. Now he fired his pistol until it was empty.

He didn't know what warned him that the following rider was coming uncomfortably close to him. For an instant he thought that Gillray was trying to pull up beside him, but he flung a glance back just in time to see the man bend deeply in the saddle. It took another second for Jeremy to realize that the ramrod was reaching for the tail of the horse just ahead of him. Raw fear welled in Jeremy. A jerk on the tail of a driving horse could throw it off balance and send it crashing. To crash here would be to die under a mass of grinding hoofs. Gillray was bent on murder.

Jeremy tried to yell his protest, but the wind washed the words away. Still bent, Gillray was intent upon his purpose. Jeremy knew his only hope was to outdistance the man. He drove in his spurs and cut his horse quickly to the right. It crossed the path of Gillray's horse, and for an instant both mounts seemed about to pile up together. Then Jeremy whipped out of the way, his horse sliding on the slippery earth. Gillray went on, straightening now and staring back.

He couldn't have seen this coming, Jeremy thought, *but he was sure quick to see his chance. He thought I'd go down without ever knowing it wasn't a natural spill. . . .* Then Gillray was lost in the darkness.

JEREMY rode on. In a moment the drive of necessity had pressed the incident out of his mind. They were running on a gentle slant. Again and again lightning rent the sodden sky, and here and there in the herd St. Elmo's fire danced on the horns and along the backs of the pounding steers. But they were bending in a broad sweep. Crowded together at their front, they were slowing. He let up on his horse.

Not until then did he grow aware that the racket of the stampede had brought out the other riders. With plenty of men to hold the spent but still nervous and moving herd, Jeremy rode off by himself, remembering Brig Gillray and that quick attempt to throw a horse and rider under the flashing hoofs. The very memory of it shook Jeremy, who thought, *If I was dead it would be simple for Jace—the only one left with any claim to Cash's estate.* He knew then that his foster brother, eternally uneasy as long as there was any threat, had decided to hedge the thing through a killing contrived to look like an accident. It had failed this time, but it would be tried again.

He found Gillray with a group of men blowing their jaded mounts. In a terse voice that he himself did not recognize, Jeremy said, "Come take a little *pasear* with me, Brig."

Gillray swung his horse away instantly. When they were at a distance, Jeremy said, "You figured I'd never know what happened. Or live to tell you that if I see one more funny move on your or Jace's part I'll kill the one making it. That clear, Brig?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gillray said, "and I've got more important worries. Turk Ormandy's horse went over a cutbank. Turk's hurt. Couple of the boys are down there with him. The rest of us was figuring out what to do."

They rode through the churning rain to the point where Turk Ormandy lay inertly on the muddy earth. Close by was a hurt horse. It was back a distance from the place where the spooked herd still milled, and must have happened at the start of the stampede. Crowded by the cattle and rushing headlong with them, Turk had gone over the cutbank in a hard, unbroken spill.

Jeremy hunkered a moment beside Turk, then in a gruff voice said, "Gillray, don't just stand there. You boys rig a litter and get him down to the branding corral where

he can be kept dry. I'll light out for the doctor."

"Hell," Gillray said, "there's no use. It's too late."

Jeremy looked at the others. "Get him down to the corral. That's orders."

He walked to his horse and swung up. Riding out through the slashing rain, it struck him that Sandra ought to be told, and he wanted to be the one to do it.

He passed the remuda at the branding corral and rode into the camp. It was darkened, pelted by the rain, and he saw that the punchers winding up the work there had crawled under the wagons and the cook's tent to get out of the weather. In no mood to be gentle, Jeremy yelled as he swung from the saddle.

Half a dozen figures stirred, then Jace's voice demanded, "What the hell?"

"So you got back," Jeremy said. "We had a run and Turk's hurt. Get a man going for the doctor."

Jace came to his feet, but still stood snug and dry under the cook fly. "Turk is?"

"Wrong man, huh, Jace? But that one looks like an accident. They're bringing him down here, so get a fire and have things set. And get a man off to town."

"Where're you going?"

"To Hornet." Jeremy swung his horse and pounded out.

He rode at a speed courting the same kind of accident that had happened to Turk, but it was Fishhook range and he knew it better than Turk had.

Hornet's ranchyard was curtained by the rain-slashed night. Jeremy rode first to the bunkhouse, where he swung down, knowing that only a couple of old cowhands would be left here to take care of the hospital bunch and the local chores. He thumped on the door energetically, until a sleepy voice made a gruff inquiry.

"Open up!" Jeremy yelled. "It's important!"

He saw a light appear dimly beyond the window adjoining the door. A board creaked and the door opened. Hump Lord, in his underwear, stood there with a lantern in his hand. He stared out into the rain.

"Turk went over a cutbank," Jeremy said. "Near as we could tell there's not much life in him. Thought I ought to fetch Sandra. Fix her a horse and I'll go over and get her up."

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Hump Lord was a big man, bent into a perpetual half-crouch by an old injury to his back. He was bald, with shaggy side-hair and a drooping mustache, and now his sharp jaw dropped. He still showed the marks of Gillray's beating.

"Turk ain't in the habit of riding over cutbanks," Hump said.

"We had a run in the thunderstorm."

Jeremy left his horse and sloshed across the puddled ranchyard. He was familiar with the Ormandy house, and went at once to the window of Sandra's groundfloor bedroom. It was still open, and she must have got home, gone to bed and fallen asleep before the start of the storm. He rushed to thump on the casing, calling, "Sandra, it's Jeremy!"

He heard a startled half cry, but no more. Then soundlessly she appeared before him, exclaiming, "Jeremy! What on earth?"

"Trouble," he said. "Bad news for you, I guess. Turk got smashed in a fall with his horse. Stampede and a cutbank. I figured you'd want to go to him."

"In this?"

Something like lead hit the pit of Jeremy's stomach. There was no sound of shock and anxiety, only concern over the night and the storm. He thought, *If it was Binty and her dad she'd light out in her nightgown.* . . . In that moment he knew that Sandra had no real feeling for her foster father. He saw suddenly how she had always coupled her interest in him, Jeremy, with an equal if not greater interest in the eventual heir to Fishhook.

Then quickly Sandra said, "Why, of course, Jeremy. I'll be ready in a jiffy."

"Never mind," he said, and he turned away from the window.

Hump Lord had dressed and was saddling a horse when Jeremy reached the corral. "Won't need it," Jeremy said.

"She refuse to go?"

"I don't want her to."

Hump's voice was kinder when he said, "Turk wouldn't either, kid. There was a row a few days ago and they spoke their true feelings."

"I heard."

"Who told you?"

"Turk. Hump, we'll fetch him down to Fishhook headquarters."

"Do that," Hump said, "and I'll head for town."

"No need. We sent for the doc."

"I'll fetch Binty to Fishhook," Hump said. "When it comes to sickness there ain't a better nurse in the country."

CHAPTER FOUR

This Is My Son

THE WIND died and the rain dwindled as he drove through the darkness toward Fishhook's south corral. He reached there in the dawn, which now was dry and warming, and dread had filled him in the last distance. Yet he reached the cow camp to find that Turk Ormandy was still alive, though the doctor had not yet come out from town. Once Turk had regained consciousness enough to speak, then he had slipped away again. Jeremy turned the buckboard over to the wrangler, not knowing if they would ever need it.

Once Jace came close enough to Jeremy to say, "How'd Sandra take it?"

"Couldn't say. Except for the feeling that she hopes he'll die so she'll get Hornet."

Jace stared at him, then turned on his heel and walked off.

Jeremy had changed to dry clothes and forced down a few bites of breakfast when a Hornet puncher came up to him and said, "Turk wants to see you."

The crew was eating, for Jace, stony-faced but impatient, meant to get on with the work. Jeremy rose, catching the quick glance Jace shot toward Gillray. The ramrod was on his feet, not far from where Turk lay in a rough bed under the hooligan wagon.

As Jeremy walked across to Turk, Gillray sidled closer.

Turk's face was pain-twisted and crusted with blood from the hard impact of his fall. He turned to stare at Gillray and said, "You get the hell outa here." The ramrod stiffened and went back to the cookfire. Turk's eyes met Jeremy's and his voice was barely audible.

"Kid, Cash swore me to secrecy, and I've never fudged to help you. But now it looks like I might not last." Pain wrenched through the man then, and for a moment Turk was silent, breathing heavily. "His will. I know what it has to say. You'll all get a surprise. Cash Jory was no fool—"

There was another silence, and Jeremy said sharply, "Turk! Hold on!" and for

a moment fear ran through him. But Turk's thin chest still rose and fell in its feeble rhythm. He seemed only to have forgotten what he meant to say. His lips worked with effort, then his eyes closed and he was out of it again.

Jace ordered the crew out to the job, but had the forbearance to ignore Jeremy, who waited close to Turk Ormandy. The doctor arrived in another two hours, made as much of an examination as he could and shook his head. "He's got a broken clavicle, which isn't too bad. But he's got a concussion, and if there's hemorrhage it's all bad."

"Can we take him down to Fishhook?" Jeremy asked.

"Not till we know what's happening in his brain."

Turk was still alive when Sandra rode in shortly after that. She was chill-faced and seemed not even to see Jeremy as she swung down. She walked at once to Turk and knelt beside him, then looked at the doctor, who was resting in the wagon shade.

"How is he?"

"Not good."

She rose, and as she turned Jeremy saw tears in her eyes. He thought, *It hit her, finally. After all, Turk took her in to raise.* She walked out a distance, and he followed. She turned and looked up into his eyes.

"Why did you ride out on me?" she asked. "Why didn't you wait?"

"I didn't think you wanted to get wet."

Bitterness touched a corner of her mouth. "That's what I thought you thought. Jeremy, did it ever occur to you that my lot hasn't been easy, either? If Turk Ormandy has any affections, he doesn't show them. As far back as I can remember I've felt that he didn't like me. That hurts. I need something to hold on to."

Pity entered him then. It had never dawned on him that Sandra's obscure origin could have affected her life the same way his own had affected him. He understood that insecurity, the wish to know things for sure.

In a gruff voice he said, "In this search for something to cling to—have you ever turned to Jace?"

She straightened. "I have not."

"You're lying."

After a moment she said, "All right, just once, and Hump Lord caught us. He or Turk Ormandy told you."

"He told me something else this morning, because he thinks he'll die. He knows what's in Cash's will. It'll be Jace."

"Jace?" Sandra's head came back and she smiled then. Something in her eyes went a million miles away from him, and there were no more tears. "So why do you figure I have to square myself with *you*, Jeremy?" she asked, and she walked away from him.

By evening, with its touch of coolness, Turk was improved enough so that the doctor gave permission for his removal to Fishhook's headquarters. Hump Lord had showed up at noon with word that he had left Binty there, and though Turk's mind was still dazed and stuporous, his tough old body showed an amazing resilience. They went down with the buckboard, Hump driving slowly, with Jeremy and the doctor astride their horses behind the rig.

The roundup was continuing, though Jeremy had no present interest in it, for Jace was determined to equal if not beat Cash's record for the operation. He was driving the men and they were turning surly on him now, upset by the night's disaster as well as finding a sting in his arrogantly exerted authority. That very afternoon an argument had arisen over a calf that had missed the spring roundup, unbranded and now deserted by its mother.

Since it showed signs of the shorthorn strain, which was mixed in Hornet's herd, a question rose between Brig Gillray and Turk Ormandy's ramrod. Refereeing, Jace settled instantly in Fishhook's favor. Jeremy, seeing the expressions that flickered on the faces of the watchers at the branding fires, understood then why Gillray had ordered his crew to back him. Fishhook was turning tough, far tougher than it had ever been in Cash's day. Jace Jory's greed was already finding its fodder.

Binty was waiting at the big ranchhouse. With a woman to take over the nursing cares, the doctor gave his orders and departed for town, a harried man who spent half his working time in the saddle. Hump returned to Hornet to keep his eye on things, while Jeremy remained with Binty overnight to spell her in the sleepless hours of watching. Sandra had gone back to Hornet that afternoon.

In the gray dawn Turk opened his eyes, and for the first time since the accident they remained clear. Jeremy was beside his bed,

and he returned the old man's pain-fraught stare with a grin. All through the night he had been puzzling over what Turk had tried to tell him about Cash's will. Now his heart beat wildly, but he was resolved not to ask the man or in any way remind him.

All Turk said now was, "Lordamighty, I've got a headache."

"You'll be all right, old-timer."

"And why not?" Turk demanded, and from that gruff heartiness Jeremy knew that the crisis was past. Turk closed his eyes again and presently drifted off to normal, restful sleep.

JEREMY went over to the bunkhouse and had his breakfast and three cups of black coffee. He knew that with Binty on hand to take care of Turk, he might as well ride back to the range and resume his regular work. He hated to go, knowing that sooner or later he would tangle with Gillray, that the next time it would be bad. He went back to the big house, determined to leave as soon as Binty was up from her short rest.

She was already up, fixing breakfast in the house's own kitchen, the rich vitality in her attested by the look of complete freshness she wore. Jeremy knew from the cheer in her face that she had seen Turk and noted his improvement, and now they could think of other things.

"You have trouble getting away from your job?" he asked.

"I quit it."

He stared. "I'll be blamed. Sandra wouldn't even ride through the rain."

Binty was fixing coffee, and she turned to look at him. "So Dad said. I'm glad you've got your eyes open."

"Me too," he said, and was a little shocked to realize that he meant it.

A horse came into the yard, but Jeremy thought little of it until a figure appeared beyond the open door and he saw that it was Jace. He heard a quick gasp from Binty and turned to see confusion on her face.

Jace halted in the doorway with a half-speculative smile on his mouth. He touched his hat to Binty, then looked at Jeremy.

"How's Turk?"

"You make all that ride just to ask?"

Jace frowned. "I did, and what's so strange about that?"

"In answer to your first question," Jeremy said, "your future daddy-in-law will live and you won't be running Hornet along with Fishhook."

Jace swung toward him, and a hand came up as if to strike out. He subsided, but his cheeks were stained. There was the coolest of smiles on Binty's lips as she watched.

She said, "Cheer up, Jace. There's still a chance that you'll be running Fishhook," and the amusement in her voice told Jeremy that, if she had ever been hurt, she was healed now.

Jace jerked his head and said, "I want to talk to you, kid," and he turned and walked out. Jeremy followed him into the yard. The cold glint was still in Jace's eyes. He studied his foster brother a moment, then said, "You better get back on the job. But first you'd ought to take a look at your starter steers. Don't know why I should bother to tell you. But I could see 'em from Rattlesnake Butte, and it looked like you're shy. Mebbe they got in the bog again." Jace turned and walked off toward the cookshack.

Jeremy stroked his chin a moment, then went down and saddled his horse. It was strange indeed that Jace should tell him that, unless it was a stung response to Jeremy's reminder of many unreturned favors.

When, later, he pulled down his horse on the butte Jace had mentioned, he saw that he had been told the truth. From that angle he could see the whole sweep of The Point, which was river-girt on its far edges so that stock was not apt to stray that way. One glance at the steers grazing at scattered distances told him they weren't all there. He emitted a tired curse and rode down.

He came upon what seemed reassurance for a time. A long, grassy neck ran in between the marshland and the upper river, and a great number of his steers were in there that had been cut from sight on the butte. Range steers applied little sense to their grazing and straying habits, but it struck him as odd that so many should be bunched in here. Jeremy swung about to check on the bog fence before he left.

He found it down, and this sent a warning quiver of nerves up his spine. He swung down from his horse, seeing again what looked like a naturally snapped strand of barbed wire. But only the top one was broken, and he could see no tracks to indicate

that any breachy steers had got through. He thought, *How did this one happen? Jace and Gillray have both been busy.*

The crack of the gun was so quick, sharp and close that it seemed right on top of him. Jeremy flung himself flat in the heavy grass, aware that he was hit but also aware that he had heard the shot and so was still alive. It would be Gillray, deeper in the marsh, the man who had already tried to kill him, and he wanted Gillray to think this effort had been a success. He got out his gun and eared back the hammer with great care to preserve the quiet.

But the stillness ran on. Jeremy could see nothing because of the high vegetation into which he had flung himself.

Jeremy's numbed side was wet with blood. Gillray had aimed low, wanting to be sure of a hit and a helpless man to fling into the bog. Maybe he had heard the click of a gun hammer and was waiting for some movement to warn him that there was still danger.

The grips of the cocked gun in his hand grew wet with sweat, but its barrel was steady. He nearly lost his control when an abrupt movement came suddenly off to his right, but he thought, *He threw something to get a rise outa me, in case I've got fight left.* The steel-willed restraint paid off, for presently he could hear movement, to his left and across from where the first sound had come. Then he could see the barest movement in the grass.

It was strange, silent. He stared open-eyed at Gillray when the man appeared over there. Gillray stared back, reading the situation, seeing the aimed gun. He was crawling, using his knees and only one hand, and his right hand held a lined gun. It was a matter of reflex speed, Jeremy knew as he pulled the trigger. He heard only the blast of his own gun, though he had stared into the muzzle of another, and now he rolled hard onto his good side. It seemed only a split second before he heard the bark of Gillray's gun, and dirt hit his face as he kept turning. Then he took a look. Gillray lay with his face dropped into the grass.

Jeremy wormed forward, exhausted, shot through with nausea. He had got Gillray full in the face, and he paused only to shake his head in lingering disbelief. His horse had bolted in the shooting, but he found Gill-

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ray's concealed within the marsh. He mounted groggily and struck out for Fishhook, wanting to see Jace Jorry.

JACE was still at headquarters, loitering at the breakfast table and talking with the cook. He must have seen Gillray's horse come into the yard with Jeremy in the saddle. It gave him time enough to wipe the shock from his face before Jeremy stepped in.

He stared at Jeremy's bloody shirt and said, "What the devil—rustlers?"

It took Jeremy aback, but then Jace was a man who prepared for every conceivable eventuality. The cook was watching, bug-eyed, and this was no place for bald accusations. "Mebbe," he said. "Anyhow, there's a dead man down in the marshes." He looked at the cook. "Tell old Claude to ride for the sheriff."

"You need a doctor," Jace said.

Jeremy's stare was hard. "Never mind. One skidded across my ribs. I reckon Binty can handle it. Don't come along, mister. I don't want your show of concern. But I'm letting it stand the way it's been settled so far only because of Cash. To my mind it's still his say."

The roundup was finished but, though his wound was not serious, Jeremy took no further part in it. It was finished in record time, yet it wound up with a bitter, sore-headed crew and a neighborhood rankled over the highhanded way a score of disputes had been settled. By that time Turk had recovered fully and returned to Hornet, and Binty had gone back to town.

The sheriff had arrived that first day, and had his look, and he accepted Jeremy's account of the gunfight. "I lost my head and whipped Gillray in front of the boys," Jeremy told the officer. "He knew that I check the marsh every chance I get. It looks like he carried a grudge too big to handle and he laid for me." He carefully avoided any reference to Jace and Jace's part in it.

The very day Jace returned to the ranch with the crew, Turk rode in with Neville Doyle, the lawyer from Twin Rivers. Jeremy hadn't known just how it would be, but had expected to be called into town for the reading of the will. The lawyer's arrival brought puzzlement to Jace's thin features as well. At Doyle's suggestion the four of them settled in chairs on the big veranda.

Doyle was a gaunt, seamy-faced man with a deceptively soft voice. Now he smiled at the foster brothers and said, "This won't take long. I drew up this will and Turk Ormandy witnessed it. I'll read it to you."

Jeremy sat with a dry and aching throat, only partly aware of the legal preamble's dry verbosity. Then the mild and casual voice caught his interest: "I have been aware for many years of how the boy I named Jason has tried to imitate me. Usually he did a fair job. But there was something he couldn't imitate. The character of a woman he has no memory of, the woman who would have been his mother had he been my son. A woman of compassion and integrity, the finest who ever lived. But this is a matter important in two lives, and sentiments should not have a part in it. The real test will come after I'm gone. And this is why I've left this one dispute to my old friend Turk Ormandy to referee. A fairer man never lived. It's his to say on the day this is read which of the two men bearing my name is my real son and sole heir." Doyle halted and refolded the paper.

"Well, Turk?" the lawyer said.

Turk gummed his tobacco a moment. "It rides the way Cash always had it pegged. But to my mind there's more than the fact that Jace shows no resemblance to the way Cash always described his wife. That's why I suggested he take Cash's job in the roundup." He stared unblinkingly at Jace. "And you don't even show any resemblance to him, put in his boots."

Jace shoved to his feet. His jaw worked, but he couldn't say anything for a moment.

"You've got your starters," Jeremy said. "Get 'em off of Fishhook. Was I you I'd take me a long, long ride before I stopped. If you do and don't ever come back, I'll let it go at that. You still bear—my father's name." It reached him as he said that, and he thought, *Dad—you were pretty sure all the time but determined to be fair.* He was scarcely aware of it when Jason walked off the porch and disappeared.

He was scarcely aware of it when the others left, either. Not till then did he go into the little used parlor of the house and stare up at Cash's picture on the wall. It was only for a moment, then he turned, knowing Cash would approve of what he aimed to do without the loss of another minute. He was going in to town to see Binty.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 63)

SO YOU think you're cowpoke material, eh? Well here's your chance to prove it. Try your hand at dabbing your loop on the twenty Western brain twisters below. If you can throw eighteen or more of them correctly, you rank excellent. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're good. But answer fewer than fourteen, and you're crowding into the sodbuster class. Good luck!

1. From what source does the word "savvy" come?

2. What is meant when a tenderfoot rider is said to be "saving saddle leather?"

3. True or false? A "side jockey" is a leather side extension found on the seat of a saddle.

4. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, what is a "sin-buster?"

5. In the Old West, the word "stack" was used in reference to: A type of horse? A type of bridle? A haystack?

6. In Western slanguage, what is the meaning of the expression "staked to a fill?"

7. If the ranch boss told you to saddle up a "Sunday horse," should you saddle up one with a rough gait, one with an easy gait, or should you just forget about the matter of gait?

8. When a horse is said to be "sunfishing" does he twist his body from right to left in a half-moon shape when he is bucking or jump up and down, landing stiff-legged?

9. When is a horse said to be "tender?"

10. True or false? A "Texas gate" is a gate through which cattle simply cannot escape.

11. True or false? A *tobiano* is a type of pinto.

12. In the slanguage of the cowpoke, what is a "top railer?"

13. An "under-bit" is a type of: Indian pony? Western horsefly? Earmark?

14. In a typical tying-down operation, does a cowpoke tie two, three or four of the animal's feet together?

15. True or false? "Wind belly" is a cowpoke slang term sometimes used in reference to an orphan calf.

16. True or false? "Windies" are cattle that have been driven from canyons and other relatively inaccessible places onto the plains.

17. In the slanguage of the Westerner, what is a "wood sheller?"

18. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "woolies," which of the following should you return with: Sheep? Wool chaps? Long underwear?

19. Is a "wring-tail" likely to make its rider nervous?

20. What is the meaning of the Western slang term "yamping?"

LONG SLEEP FOR TWO KNIVES

By WILLIAM HEUMAN

THIS WAS a land of huge mountains tumbled together, their tops sprinkled with snow. Gigantic Douglas firs and the ageless Sequoia climbed these slopes, thinning out near the timberline, and then there was gray rock and scrub growth all the way to the snow.

In the big cedars the cedar waxwing and the catbird sang their songs, but there was no song in the heart of Two Knives, the Blackfoot, as he threaded his way through the giant forests toward the north, toward the village of his people, and the disgrace awaiting him there.

Riding his big brown and white spotted warhorse, he would have been in the village many days before, but the Shifty-Eyed One had taken the horse as well as the packs of precious beaver and otter skins they'd laboriously hoarded during the cold winter in the high mountains. The Shifty-Eyed One had taken everything—the new rifle Two Knives had bought from the British traders the previous summer, the horses, the traps and the packs, the beaver skins with which they were to trade with the *engagés* at the rendezvous. The Shifty-Eyed One had not even left food in the cabin when he'd disappeared while Two Knives was following the trapline along the stream they'd worked that winter.

With only a knife in his belt, Two Knives had had to provide for himself as he made the long journey north to the land of his people. He'd made snares and caught a few rabbits, but he'd been very hungry that first week until he'd knifed the lame doe, running it down the way a wolf ran down the timid creatures of the forest.

He had meat for many days, and the choice parts were still wrapped in the carcass tied to his back as he threaded his way through the woods, his moccasins torn, wrapped in pieces of the deerskin.

At first he'd thought of going after the Shifty-Eyed One, the stealer, but he'd decided against it. He was unarmed, and the white man with whom he'd trapped that late winter and early spring had two rifles, The Shifty-Eyed One had been moving very fast toward the South, riding a strong horse, the finest warhorse in the Blackfoot camp. In a very few days, he would be at the rendezvous where there were many white men, the mountain men who hated the Blackfeet with an undying hatred.

Many of them had died with Blackfoot arrows sticking into them, and many Blackfoot braves had gone under in these frequent, bitter skirmishes with the mountain men. A Blackfoot riding into rendezvouz would have his scalp lifted within ten minutes, and, aware of this, Two Knives had turned north instead of south, knowing the laughter and the ridicule he would have to face in his own village when he returned empty-handed after all the vain boasts he'd made the previous fall when he'd left with the Shifty-Eyed One.

He had promised to come back with many presents for Red Horse, father of Little Doe. He'd promised blankets and bright beads, and a new rifle, the long-bladed Green River knife they traded at the rendezvous. All this would be placed before the tepee of Red Horse so that Little Doe would come to the lodge of Two Knives.

Red Horse wanted the white man's presents, the bright blankets, the rifle, the powder and the bullets. These the Shifty-Eyed One had promised to Two Knives if he would go with him in the high mountains to trap the beaver.

The Shifty-Eyed One was not a true mountain man, because the mountain men would not dare go near a Blackfoot camp. The Shifty-Eyed One spoke a different language; he'd come down from the North,

Two Knives brought his arm back and threw the knife. . . .

from the Great Grandmother's country where the British traders came from. He spoke the Blackfoot language; he claimed to love the Blackfoot people as his brothers, but there was a lie in his heart.

The Shifty-Eyed One had needed a guide to show him where the best streams were located in the high mountains, among the big trees; he needed someone to help him with his traplines, and to hunt and bring in fresh meat, but when he had all the beaver skins that he wanted, he stole horse and gun and supplies, and he left his brother with a knife in his hand to provide for himself.

Two Knives paused for a drink at one of the streams. He chewed a little on a piece of raw venison as he moved soundlessly through the big forests. He remembered

They had made a song about the disgrace of Two Knives, a woman in the lodge of his father. And Two Knives knew that the song would live after him, shaming his memory, for the path to honor led where no Blackfoot had ever been —save in death!

this country. In another two hours he would come out of the mountains and into the huge valley of the Blackfoot camp.

Big Bear, who was his good friend, and with whom he'd gone on many war parties against the Crows and the Assiniboines, saw him first as he came into the valley. Big Bear was bringing in several ponies from the big herd in the south end of the valley. He stopped and stared at Two Knives walking slowly down the slope, the meat pack on his back, his moccasins torn, a knife in his belt, no rifle, not even bow and arrows.

Big Bear said, "Ho! Where are the blankets and the rifle; where is your spotted horse, my friend?"

Two Knives looked at him out of gaunt, somber eyes. He said, "The Shifty-Eyed One had a bad heart, Big Bear. He stole the spotted horse and my rifle."

Big Bear's eyes widened. "You brought back his scalp, my friend?" he said.

Two Knives shook his head. "The Shifty-Eyed One went where the white trappers meet with the traders. Some day I will catch him."

Big Bear laughed. "One never catches the wolverine," he observed, "after he has broken into the cache."

"This wolverine will die before many moons," Two Knives said tersely. He jumped on one of the loose ponies, riding it down to the village, and Big Bear rode before him, chanting, "Ho! Ho! Two Knives is back with his friends!"

THEY watched him come. Red Horse sat in front of his lodge, one of his beautiful painted stallions tied in front of it. Red Horse looked at Two Knives, looked at the horse he rode which did not belong to him; looked at his moccasins, at his gaunt face, because he had not filled out yet after that first week on nothing but an occasional rabbit.

Red Horse's amber-colored eyes moved past Two Knives to the pack-horses which should have followed, carrying blankets and trade goods, beads, the new rifle, powder and balls for the rifle. There were no pack-horses; there was nothing.

Two Knives did not look at the old man. He rode by, staring stiffly ahead of him, riding for his father's lodge at the far end of the village, knowing that already the word was going before him. He'd been fooled and robbed by the Shifty-Eyed One who had made the big promises in the village. None of the other young men had been taken in by that talk. They had been wise; they had taken scalps from the Crows and the Gros Ventres; they had buffalo robes to trade with the British traders to the north. Two Knives had nothing—a knife in his belt, a parcel of meat on his back, and even the meat had been taken from a lame doe. A boy could have done as well.

His father, Black Robe, sat just inside the lodge entrance, cleaning an old Hawkins rifle he'd traded from the Snakes. Black Robe looked up when Two Knives slid from the pony's back. They had not seen each other for many months, but neither one of them spoke now.

Black Robe pointed to the pot of boiling meat over the fire inside, and Two Knives sat down, handing one of Black Robe's squaws the packet of meat. The squaw was not his mother. She had died many years ago, and he'd scarcely known her.

Two Knives ate silently, hungrily, picking the meat out of the pot with his fingers, tossing the bones outside the door where the dogs snatched them up and fought over them.

Black Robe said over his shoulder, "You did not go to the white man's trading place. Were the beaver people hard to find?"

"We found many beaver," Two Knives said briefly, "but the Shifty-Eyed One had a bad heart. He stole the *plieus;* he stole my warhorse and my rifle."

Black Robe thought of that for a moment, and then he said, "It is not good to steal from a Blackfoot."

Two Knives sat in front of the fire in the gloomy lodge, staring into the flames. After a while visitors started to come, friends and relatives, having heard he was back. They filed into the lodge and they sat around on the buffalo robes, smoking, waiting for him to tell his story. They'd heard it from Big Bear, but they still wanted to hear it from him.

It was the ordeal Two Knives had dreaded all the way back to the village, knowing that he had to face it, knowing that they would smile and joke one with another when he was not around. When war parties were chosen to go against the Assiniboines, he would not be asked. In the councils he would not be expected to get up and make

his talk the way the others did. He was a squaw now.

He told them briefly, honestly, what had happened. He'd expected to go to the rendezvous with the Shifty-Eyed One, posing as a Snake because he spoke the Snake language, and many Snakes went to the rendezvous. They'd had a half dozen packs of beaver and otter, very choice *plieus*.

The day before they were to go to the rendezvous, the Shifty-Eyed One had suggested that he go out alone to bring in the remaining traps. When he returned the cabin was empty.

"Ho!" Two Knives' uncle, Running Buffalo, said, "I would have killed that man."

Black Robe, the father, sat in the corner, cleaning his gun, saying nothing, but the hurt was in his eyes. Two Knives could see that; he was Black Robe's only son, and Black Robe had had high hopes for him. He'd counted two *coups* in his first war-party against the Crows the previous summer. He was young, but he expected to be a great warrior.

After a while the crowd filed out, and Two Knives lay back on the buffalo robes, staring up into the gloom of the lodge. It was dark outside now, and the firelight flickered on the lodge walls.

Two Knives said to his father, "Has Little Doe found a man yet?"

"Red Horse waits for the presents from Two Knives," his father told him. "He has waited all through the spring."

Black Robe looked across the lodge at him, the lines showing deeply on his mahogany face. He said, "You will go to the rendezvous, my son?"

Two Knives nodded. "At the new moon," he said. The new moon was due within a few days. He wanted to rest up those few days, to recover his strength.

Black Robe seemed satisfied. He said no more on the subject. Outside, a rider was moving in and out among the lodges, chanting, "Ho! Ho! We ride against the Gros Ventres!"

He carried a lance with eagle feathers dangling from it, and as he rode he thrust the lance up into the air. Black Robe said, "Some of the young men are leaving to steal horses from the Gros Ventres. They go tomorrow."

"Who will lead them?" Two Knives asked.

"The Hook," his father said, and Two Knives frowned. Hook was a man he did not like. The Hook had already led two beautiful war ponies to Red Horse's lodge and tied them there as a gift to Red Horse for his daughter, Little Doe, but Red Horse had left the horses where they were, and the scowling Hook had come around the next morning and taken them away. Knowing that Little Doe favored Two Knives, the Hook, a big man with a sharp nose, had taken a very evident dislike to his rival.

But with his best war pony stolen, and his rifle gone, Two Knives had nothing to offer to Red Horse. A man who could not make a gift was not a man at all.

In the morning the young men who were to go against the Gros Ventres paraded through the village, their faces painted, riding their best war horses. The Hook rode at their head, white and black circles painted on his face, intermingled.

Two Knives sat in front of his lodge, watching them go by, his face expressionless. He'd seen Little Doe that morning going down to the stream for water, and she'd seen

him, but she had not come over. She'd looked the other way as if she did not know he was back in the village. He'd expected this. It was the proper conduct for an Indian maiden.

THE HOOK had stopped directly in front of Two Knives' lodge, and he sat astride the big gray horse he'd stolen from the army men far to the east. He boasted of the scalps he would take on this war party; he boasted of his prowess in a battle, and the crowd gathered around to listen to him.

Black Robe came out of the lodge and stood there, listening too, face stony. The Hook started to chant now. He'd composed his song during the night, and Two Knives listened to it, the hot anger beginning to boil inside of him. The song went:

Ho! Two Knives went forth to bring home much presents. Ho! Ho!
The Shifty-Eyed One stole his horse and his rifle. Ho!
The Hook will drive the Gros Ventres as the Blackfeet drive the buffalo.
He will bring home many horses to stand before the lodge of Red Horse.

There were other verses to the song, and always the Hook finished with the words:

The Shifty-Eyed One's heart is bad, but Two Knives' heart is weak—like a woman's.

Two Knives stood up, his dark eyes glittering. He said grimly, "The Hook lies. He speaks big things, but the Hook will not ride against the mountain men's guns; he goes against the Gros Ventres because they have bows and arrows, and they are not great fighters. The Hook is afraid of the white trappers who live in the high mountains."

The Hook stopped his chant. He glared at Two Knives, his ringed face hideous. Then he edged his warhorse closer to Two Knives at the lodge entrance. He said, "Two Knives ran away like the rabbit when the Shifty-Eyed One took his horse and his rifle. Who is afraid of the mountain men?"

The Hook had pushed the big gray horse close up against Two Knives as he spoke, shoving him rudely against the lodge. It was more than Two Knives could stand. His eyes blazing, he reached up, grasped the Hook around the waist, and wrenched him to the ground.

The Hook snorted as he fell, and his right hand snaked out his axe. As he rolled on the ground he swung the axe at Two Knives' face, grazing his chin with it.

A squaw screamed. Two Knives whipped his Green River knife from his belt, but before he could use it four members of the Fox band, the police society of the village, were in among them, separating them.

They stood up, glaring at each other, and then the Hook leaped onto his gray horse and rode away. A little while later he and a dozen members of his war party scampered across the stream, heading north and west.

Two Knives watched them go, and then he made up his mind. Catching up one of his father's horses at the door, he rode out into the meadow, riding through the pony herd until he located a little black and white pony, one of his own horses, an animal he'd stolen from the Crows. The little pony was not as strong or as fast as his big brown and white war horse, but she would take him where he wanted to go.

He came back to the lodge, riding the pony, and he said to his father, "I will ride today to the South, to the rendezvous of the mountain men."

Black Robe nodded, his eyes pleased. He went into the lodge and came out with the Hawkins mountain rifle he'd been cleaning, and he handed it to Two Knives. He said, "Go, my son. Find the Shifty-Eyed One. He cannot run so far that a Blackfoot will not find him."

Two Knives tied his medicine bag around his neck. It was a small buckskin pouch, containing the tooth of a very old beaver, the right ear of a white wolf, and the tail feathers of the little owl which lives in the holes with the snakes.

Black Robe's squaw made him a pack containing jerked buffalo meat and some of the venison he'd brought in the previous day. He had his knife in his belt, his axe, and a bow and sheath of arrows to do his hunting in the mountains. The arrows would make no sounds, and he would not bring the mountain men down on his head. He had no quarrel with the mountain men; he wanted to meet only the Shifty-Eyed One.

Little Doe was down at the edge of the stream as he rode by. She was chatting gayly with other young girls, but she glanced

at him shyly as he went past. He rode past the last lodge, and then up the slope toward the woods, never looking back once.

He did not eat until nightfall, because a Blackfoot on the war trail takes little thought for food. He rode on and on deep into the mountains again, losing himself among the huge trees, stopping only to water the black and white pony, and then pushing on again.

He made a small fire in a deep glade when nightfall came, roasted some of the venison, eating it half raw, quenched his thirst with water from a nearby spring, and then rolled into his blanket and went to sleep.

He was up again and traveling in the gray dawn, pushing south toward the rendezvous in the big valley by the lake. He knew of the place. For many years now the mountain men had met together in the big valley below the shining mountains. Other Indian tribes had met with them, anxious to trade, to bring in their own pelts. The Crows and the Snakes and the Shoshones were there, but the Blackfeet, implacable enemies of the mountain men, did not come.

For five days he pushed due south through the mountains, climbing again the high slopes he'd climbed on foot, dipping down into the canyons. Twice he passed small parties of mountain men, headed for the big valley. He saw their pack ponies loaded with *plieus* with which they would be able to buy many presents for their squaws, and drink the brandy the traders brought in from the east.

He shot a deer with his bow when his meat was exhausted, and he cut out the best parts of the animal to take with him. He was making very good time through the mountains, and the little black and white pony was strong, sturdy.

He passed more trappers, and then another band of Snakes when he was a day's journey from the rendezvous. This second band, consisting of about five families, were camped in a tiny valley, their cookfires glowing when Two Knives came upon them.

This time, instead of riding around the camp, he rode in boldly, dismounting near one of the fires, the men watching him tensely. Two of them had rifles, old flintlock guns; the others carried bows and arrows. The men with the rifles held them in readiness, their dark eyes shining in the firelight.

TWO KNIVES spoke in the Snake tongue, saying, "I am hungry, friends." He sat down beside the fire, and he watched them relax. They did not know him, but this was not unusual. There were many bands of Snakes in the mountain country to the east, and he could have been a member of any of them.

The leader of this band, a lean, graying man, pointed to the pot over the fire. Two Knives helped himself, eating voraciously, knowing that that was expected of him.

The squaws and the children watched him intently, and after awhile they relaxed. The men started to talk; they had questions to ask him. He told them that he had been far to the north, the land of the Great Grandmother. He'd been after Flathead horses, a small party of four men. They'd stolen many horses, but on the way back the Blackfeet had intercepted them. His companions had been killed, and the horses taken away, but he'd escaped. The Blackfeet were a bad people.

The Snakes nodded their heads vigorously at this statement, and then the old man bragged how he'd gone against the Blackfeet in his youth, counting his first *coup* against them, and bringing a scalp with him when he went home.

In the morning Two Knives traveled with the Snakes. They were headed for the rendezvous to enjoy the games, the horse races, the good fellowship, to drink the trappers' brandy and to trade for mirrors and beads, and the little gew-gaws so dear to the hearts of the squaws.

They had travois with them, dragging their lodges, dogs trailing them, the children running alongside. Two Knives made a side excursion that morning, shot a deer with his bow, and brought in the fresh meat to the camp when they stopped to eat. The Snakes were very pleased with this, and he was accepted as one of them.

At nightfall they rode into the valley. Coming out of the trees they could see the hundreds of fires twinkling along the valley floor. Bands of Snakes, Crows, Shoshones, had set up their lodges in the north end of the valley along the shores of the lake. The mountain men were at the other end, and Two Knives could hear them as he

came into the valley, their wild laughter, the singing, the shouts.

The little Snake band he'd joined made their camp with other Snakes down along the edge of the lake. The women set up the lodges while the men sat around, smoking, talking.

Two Knives sat apart from the others. He was at the rendezvous now, and he wondered how he would go about catching the Shifty-Eyed One. He could not walk down to the other end of the valley and confront him with his theft.

He would have to be patient; he had to find where the Shifty-Eyed One camped in the valley, and then he had to make his plans. A group of drunken mountain men swaggered past the camp, singing, drinking out of a big keg of brandy one of them had strapped to his back as he staggered along.

They passed within ten feet of the Snake camp, and Two Knives sat there in the shadow of the lodge, looking at the fire, his eyes moving, watching the mountain men.

They were big, many of them quite young, as brown as Indians, wearing buckskins blackened from a hundred campfires. Some of them wore the cloth coats brought in by the traders, but most were in full buckskin with beaver or wolfskin caps, and moccasins.

They sauntered by, yelling at the squaws, who smiled back at them, waving big tin cups, filling the cups, drinking enormous quantities of the fiery liquor.

In the morning there were horse races. Two Knives sat up on the brow of the hill overlooking the valley, watching the races, and then it was that he saw the brown and white spotted war horse. The horse was ridden by an Indian boy in the race, and he won the race by a wide margin.

At the finish line, among the mob of yelling, gesticulating mountain men and silent, absorbed Indians, Two Knives spotted the Shifty-Eyed One. He was wearing his dirty white French *voyageur's* coat and his wolfskin cap, the only coat of its kind in the camp, and Two Knives recognized it immediately, even at that distance.

The Indian boy had been riding the war-horse for the Shifty-Eyed One, and the thief now had the horse and was leading him away. Two Knives watched him go, watched him walking toward the big marquee under which the traders had set up their trade goods, then Two Knives descended to the Snake camp.

Down at the camp he squatted outside the lodge, helping himself from the big pot of meat which was boiling over the fire all the time now. The Snake squaws were already decked out with the finery they'd gotten from the traders—bright beads, shawls of bright red and yellow, shining metal bracelets. They laughed as they worked around the camp, glancing at him curiously as he sat in the sun.

He was Whoo-Pa-Ti to them, the Silent One.

After awhile Two Knives got up and moved away from the lodge. He had to find out where the Shifty-Eyed One camped at night, and after that he would make his plans. He had to be very careful, though, and as he walked he watched.

The Shifty-Eyed One had gone beyond the marque up into the woods along the rim of the valley. Many of the mountain men were camped there. They'd thrown up rude brush huts, and they spent the days in eating, dancing, singing, playing games, trading with the traders.

None of them took any particular notice of Two Knives as he walked among the huts. There were many Indians here from the different tribes, curious as usual, some of them squatting on the ground in front of the huts, just watching, listening, their faces expressionless. The mountain men took no particular notice of them.

Two Knives walked around one hut, and then came face to face with the Shifty-Eyed One. He had been very careful as he walked, but there was the Shifty-Eyed One in his dirty white coat and his wolfskin cap.

He stared at Two Knives, his lower jaw drooping a little, the fear coming into his eyes. He wore Indian leggins with a fringe of human hair. His face was the color of mahogany, wedge-shaped, a narrow, bony nose, cruel, thin mouth. His hair was as long as an Indian's, black, tied in a queue at the back.

For one moment Two Knives stared at him, not quite certain what he would do, himself. Then he wrenched his knife from his belt and lunged forward.

The Shifty-Eyed One screeched and bolted around a corner of the hut, howling at the top of his voice,

"Blackfoot—Blackfoot!"

THE MOUNTAIN MEN tumbled out of their huts, thinking at first it was a Blackfoot raid, but hardly able to comprehend this. They stared, their Hawkins' rifles and big-bore Nor'west fusils in hand, as Two Knives chased the diminutive Shifty-Eyed One around the hut.

Knowing that he could not escape now, Two Knives was intent only on taking his enemy with him.

Two Knives' knife flashed through the air, missing the Shifty-Eyed One by a fraction of an inch. He slashed again, and the knife ripped the white coat, possibly grazing the little trapper.

He let out a scream.

Two Knives was going after him again when he received the blow on the head.

It was dusk when he opened his eyes, and a big fire was burning fiercely out in front of one of mountain mens' huts. He lay on his side, his hands bound behind his back, but with his legs free.

There was a pow-wow going on among the mountain men. Many Indians were there too, swarming around the huts, the firelight glowing on their passive, mahogany faces.

They were talking about him, Two Knives realized, deciding what they would do with him. The Shifty-Eyed One was there, his face distorted, virulent with hate as he spoke. Some of the Snakes and the Crows, ancient enemies of the Blackfeet, glanced at Two Knives now and then, their dark eyes glittering.

He sat up so that he could see better, and as he did so, a mountain man, sitting a few yards from him looked his way. This man was big. His hair was flaming red, the brightest color Two Knives had ever seen. The red-readed man was smiling.

Two Knives saw something else in the light of that huge campfire. Just a short distance away from the spot where he lay was the hut of the Shifty-Eyed One. The spotted brown and white warhorse was tied nearby, and in the hut undoubtedly were the bright blankets, the trinkets, the gun, and the gew-gaws the Shifty-Eyed One had already traded for the *plieus* he'd stolen. He would be able to find much favor in the sight of Shoshone and Snake squaws with those many presents, and thinking of Little Doe, Two Knives' heart was bitter with him.

One of the Snakes out of the band Two Knives has joined was brought up, and they asked him questions in the Snake tongue, Two Knives being able to understand now.

A big bull-necked man with the scar wanted to know where they'd met the Blackfoot. The Snake told him. Then the big man looked at Two Knives curiously.

"Why did the Blackfoot try to kill the White-Coat?"

Two Knives stared at him, and then at the Shifty-Eyed One. He said evenly, "The White-Coat stole the Blackfoot's *plieus,* stole his horse, and his gun."

"Lies!" the Shifty-Eyed One screamed.

Two Knives stared at him, his eyes bright with hatred. He said no more; he had said what he had to say, and the white men knew why he had come. The Shifty-Eyed One was speaking in a different tongue now, haranguing the mountain men, and the Indians around the fire listened, and nodded.

Two Knives knew what he was saying. The Shifty-Eyed One wanted him to be killed. He was a Blackfoot, and the Blackfeet had killed many mountain men and many Indians.

Very clearly, Two Knives realized he was going to die. The mountain men had no use for the Blackfeet, and maybe they did not

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believe him when he said the Shifty-Eyed One stole his *plieus*. They thought that the Blackfeet always lied.

The Shifty-Eyed One was speaking to the Indians now, speaking in the Snake tongue which many of them knew, telling them of all the evil things the Blackfeet had done in the past, how many men they'd wiped out. The humming sound grew louder all the time.

The mountain men had started to drink, a casket of brandy having been set up. Two Knives tested the ropes on his wrists, finding them very strong. He sat there, watching.

The red-headed mountain man stood by the fire, listening to the Shifty-Eyed One, and then he turned and glanced at Two Knives. He was smiling as he came forward, holding a green stick with a piece of meat on it. Bending down, he held the meat to Two Knives' mouth, and then he did something else. In the shadows as he bent down, he'd slipped his knife out of his belt. With one swift movement his left arm went behind Two Knives. There was a sharp stroke and the cords were cut.

Two Knives looked at him. He took the piece of meat in his mouth and he chewed on it. The red-headed man smiled at him, straightened up, and went back to the fire. Two Knives kept his hands behind his back, but his eyes were moving now. Behind him the woods were dark.

The red-headed man stood by the brandy casket, and then he shouted in his own tongue, gesturing with a big tin cup. He was telling the Indians to come forward and have a drink. Then he glanced in Two Knives' direction.

It was a sign. As the Indians started to crowd around the casket, forgetting Two Knives for the moment, Two Knives suddenly leaped to his feet, whirled and plunged away from the hut.

There was another hut behind this one, but it was empty, and after that the dark woods. They had seen him, and he heard the wild yells. A rifle cracked, and then another one. Arrows whispered.

The mountain men whooped hilariously, joining in the fun, racing through the dark woods. Two Knives heard them coming. He turned off at right angles, veering sharply, and then he made a wide detour, hearing his pursuers go past him as he worked his way back toward the encampment.

HE RAN very fast now because he had to get back while they were all away in the woods.

He came back into the deserted camp with the big fire still blazing away, and he went directly to the Shifty-Eyed One's hut. The warhorse stood in the same place, stamping his hoofs restlessly.

Two Knives bent down, pulled the tarpaulin away from the trade goods the Shifty-Eyed One had gotten for himself. There was a new rifle under the tarpaulin, several bright blankets, powder and balls, knives, rolls of bright cloth and beads.

Two Knives scooped them up, rolled as much as he could into the big tarpaulin, tied the pack securely and then hauled it up on the back of the warhorse. Working very rapidly, he lashed the pack to the horse, not too securely because he had no time.

Holding the Shifty-Eyed One's new rifle, and with a Green River knife in his belt, Two Knives started to lead the warhorse back into the woods. He could hear the distant shouting as he walked.

Coming out of the woods, and into the firelight, a rifle in his hands, was the Shifty-Eyed One. He had given up the chase and was the first one back into the camp. He stopped less than thirty feet from Two Knives, still breathing hard from his run through the woods. For one moment he stared stupidly, and then he opened his mouth to yell. He was bringing his rifle up, lining it on Two Knives' body when the Green River knife flew through the air.

The Shifty-Eyed One made a small, plaintive sound as he dropped to the ground, the knife protruding from his chest. Running forward, Two Knives snatched up the extra rifle and then disappeared into the woods, leading the warhorse.

Before leaving the valley he stole two Shoshone horses to use them as pack animals, and then he stopped a few miles from the valley to repack. He rode the warhorse then, with the pack animals trailing behind him, and he rode proudly toward the north to his people.

He was thinking, though, as he rode that all the white men were not good and all were not bad, just as there were good and bad Indians. He was glad that he had found one good white man—the man with the bright red hair—and he hoped that that red scalp would never hang in an Indian tepee.

Carmody threw the lamp, and a pool of flame spread. . . .

Not many men can gamble their lives — and lose — and still have enough left for another deal. Carmody did, and won the strangest jackpot of all, when—

BULLETS BET A BLUE CHIP

By James Charles Lynch

THE TRAIN slowed and stopped and the homesteaders traveling west toward the promised land began to grumble about the delay, but Burch Carmody did not care whether the string of cars stopped, sped ahead or backed up. All morning long Carmody had watched stray tumbleweeds roll north before the hard prairie wind. Sometimes they would catch and hang and pause a while, then break

loose and go on again, but somewhere they would come up against something that would stop them for good. Carmody had long believed himself committed to the same result.

This station platform Carmody looked out upon, from his seat beside the train coach window, was the same scene he had looked upon a dozen times since the train had crossed the Mississippi. A yellow building, a man wearing a straw cap with a tarnished badge above the visor, always looking at the train with watch in hand. Always an old man chewing his tobacco slowly and contemplating the sights this train had left behind, and a youngster, bright-eyed, wondering where it was going, and others caught in the vacuum of in-between.

The motion of three people rounding the station corner caught Carmody's eye. The young woman, he had never seen a woman like her before, carried a small leather valise held with both hands across her stomach. Her mouth was set angrily and anger showed in her blue eyes, making them brilliant.

The man next to her wore a star and a gun, and he kept sullenly watching the toes of his boots, obviously not relishing his duty. At his left strode a tall man, his big frame well covered with flesh. He carried his head high and he looked around him with the air of a man determined to dominate whatever environment he might find himself in at the moment. Behind these three a prim group of solid citizens appeared and stopped at the station corner to watch.

A brawny farmer and his wife sat in the seat ahead of Carmody, and the man said, with smug satisfaction, "Looks like that fine-feathered pair is gettin' run out of town."

"That hussy, yes," the wife said, "but not the man. He's a handsome devil."

The sound Carmody made in his throat made the woman look around, but it appeared she might be right. The big man lifted a hand in affable salute to the lawman and came straight on toward the train. The woman turned and made some protest and started to balk. The marshal caught her arm and led her toward the front end of the train. The farmer's wife turned her head again and sniffed.

The engine took up the slack in the coupling bars and the train moved on. Behind Carmody the vestibule door opened, letting in a swirl of dust and noise. Carmody moved closer to the window; the vacant place beside him was the only empty seat left in the coach.

The big man came up, flung his bag into the overhead rack and settled down. From his neatly clipped hair and clean-shaven heavy features came the odors of the barber shop and the smell of trapped cigar smoke spread out from his somber black coat. He looked at Carmody and said, as if there could be no doubt about him being right, "You look a little light to me to be a farmer. Name's Charley Hess."

Carmody turned an innocent stare on the man. "I'm no farmer," he said. "I taught school a while, ran at Bull Run because the Army ran, and then turned around and went back because the Army started marching south. Since the war I've tried my hand at a lot of things and found nothing that satisfied me. I don't know where I'm going or what I'll do when I get there." He favored Hess with a shy smile and added, apologetically, "I'm telling you all this so you won't have to ask me so many questions."

Hess had a heavy, positive voice. "In the direction you're heading, it pays a man not to talk any bigger than he is. It's rough country."

Carmody lifted his hat and ran his fingers through his thick yellow hair. He was barely three inches taller than the average woman's height. The flat planes of his face were finely drawn and he had a strong, straight nose. About his gray eyes lay a startling suggestion of boldness and fierce temper, but the boyish, smiling twist of his mouth destroyed that illusion.

"What I was trying to say," he murmured, "you've watched the little ball spin around the rim of a roulette wheel, looking for a place to light? That's me—the little ball. I'm still rolling."

Hess grunted. "When the little ball stops, somebody always gets hurt. I don't think you'll make the same splash."

"Hard to tell," Carmody said.

Hess seemed determined to settle this thing his own way. "It's pure luck when the ball stops, but a man picks his own place—if he's any kind of a man. No matter which way the army goes, he picks his own direction."

"You're wrong," argued Carmody. "A man never picks his own place. Folks pick

it for him. You get maneuvered into position and you don't have a damned thing to say about it."

"I don't agree with you," said Hess.

Carmody shrugged. "That's the hell of being little. You have to hit a man on the head with a timber before he gets your point."

"I—" Hess started to say, and stopped, his interest changing.

The woman who had boarded the train at the last stop came in at the head end of the coach. She was beautiful and lithe, almost as tall as Carmody. Her long gray coat was open and the low-necked, tight-waisted dress she wore beneath it made the women in the car look disapprovingly.

"It's her!" the woman ahead of Carmody muttered, shocked. "That hussy they put on back there."

She came slowly down the aisle, still carrying her single piece of luggage and trying to hide the weary droop of her shoulders, but not letting that weariness affect the stubborn right she felt to be here. One hulking young man uncrossed his legs and would have stood up for her, but his comely wife put a restraining hand on his knee until the woman passed them, and then she looked at her man, sullenly.

Carmody caught himself staring and made himself look at Hess. Hess had taken a cigar from his pocket and was biting heavily into the tobacco, but paying no attention to what he was doing; waiting for the woman to notice him.

WHEN she did, she hesitated slightly, the way a woman does as she lifts her skirt to step over something not fit to walk upon. Hess saw it. A slow flush crawled up his neck and colored his cheeks and he looked up at the ceiling, ignoring her. Carmody knew Hess would not offer her his seat.

When she was almost abreast, Carmody rose and said, "Pardon me."

The flush left the big man's cheeks and he smacked his lips with satisfaction as he stood up and moved out into the aisle to let Carmody out. Carmody pressed back against him, touched the woman's arm and tried to turn her into the seat. He felt refusal stiffen her at first, then it turned to weary resignation. Nodding her thanks and framing the word with her exquisite lips, she moved in and sat down, gathering her coat tightly about her.

Carmody dropped down beside her and left Hess standing there in the aisle.

For a long time there was no sound except the thud of the wheel trucks and the creak of the jolting, wooden coach. Carmody could feel the anger building up in Hess and waiting, wondering if the big man would do something now or nurse his rage until later. Hess finally said, "This train stops for ten minutes at the next town. I'll be behind the depot."

"Don't disappoint me," said Carmody, sighing, and watched Hess stride out of the coach chewing on his cigar.

The woman's long hands lay on the valise she had chosen to carry on her lap. For a while her fingers caressed the brown leather, then she turned suddenly and said, "I appreciate it, but it was a foolish thing for you to do. Hess is a bad man when he's angry."

"Hess," said Carmody, "is a bad man whether he's angry or not. He thinks too much of himself. Don't worry about it."

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"Well!" sniffed the woman in the seat ahead and her husband said, quickly, "Forget it, Martha. It's nothing to you."

The woman beside Carmody frowned at the one ahead of her and then turned toward him. Her complexion was flawless, her features finely chisled and her eyes less brilliant now that her anger was half gone. There was no rouge on her cheeks or lips, but she did wear some sort of perfume Carmody liked.

She said, "It never pays a man to do anything for woman like me. We're not worth it."

"How would you know that?" Carmody asked.

"Because I am the kind of a woman I am."

"I always thought," said Carmody, gently, "that there was only one kind of woman—that it was only methods that are different. Some of you are content with a room in a house and a man, and some of you have to have a hundred and sixty acres of prairie planted in grain and a man. Some of you won't settle for anything less than a king and a castle. What are you aiming for?"

"What do you care?"

"You look so lonely," Carmody murmured, bringing a flash of anger back into her eyes.

"Men," she said, "have an idea a woman needs them. That's wrong. I can plow my own land or build my own castle. It's time you learned that women differ."

Carmody shook his head. "I'm not a boy. No matter what a woman does, all she ever is to herself in her heart is measured by what a man sees in her. If that were not so, this would be a sorry world for a lot of women, and it is. Some women seem hellbent on drawing the wildness out of a man instead of his gentler side. The ones that do that get hurt."

"Or get what they want," she countered. "If I ever find that, I'll buy it and never cry over what it cost. And I'll never look for a bargain."

She withdrew into herself and he said no more.

A long-drawn whistle blast floated back from the engine, and some part of that lonely wail got to Carmody, bringing him the fleeting wish that he could be like the brawny men and their women who were beginning to stand up now, anxious to get off the train and stretch their legs. They were the solid rocks that caught the tumbleweeds like him and made them wait for a change in the wind or trapped them forever.

"Coldwater!" a brakeman yelled, walking through the coach. "Ten minutes here! Coldwater!"

The train stopped and the passengers began to shuffle out, all of them looking at him and wondering what he was going to do. When he stirred, the woman beside him clamped a tight grip on his arm.

"Don't get off," she said. "Sit still."

"Why?" Carmody asked.

"Because it won't do you any good. You can't handle Hess. He's bad."

"I'm not worrying about how bad Hess is," Carmody told her. "I'm wondering about how good I am."

"Don't try to find out by showing off," she suggested, then added, "Even if you could handle Hess, and did, what do you think it will get you?"

Carmody put his free hand over hers and a quick smile broke across his face. "A man never knows," he said, and rose and walked out.

On the station platform, Carmody paid no attention to the settlers staring at him. He did not know whether or not he liked their interest in him, but he could not prevent it. One second he thought of himself as a fool and the next second a strange determination took over and something like a strong wind blew heavily against his back, urging him on.

He jumped off the platform and walked slowly down the side of the depot and turned the back corner.

Hess waited there. The knife in his hand glittered in the sun. The point of the blade bit deep into Carmody's right shoulder and ripped down across his chest. Striking a coat button it came free, then plunged deeper again.

Instinctively, Carmody batted the big man's hand aside and had a look into his eyes. Then the shock of what the blade had done to him flowed through Carmody and he felt himself go weak. He put a hand hard against the depot wall, but that did no good. Down on his knees he went, bent over, and then he toppled on his side.

Lying in that position he watched Hess run away. He tried to say something, but he could not hear the words he spoke.

In the far distance, someone said, "He's cut bad. He'll die. I bet."

The tumbleweed rolled and bounced before the wind, then came up against something solid and hung there.

"You hear him say something then?" somebody asked.

"He said something about a tumbleweed. He's out of his head."

Carmody felt them lift and carry him. Later the face of the woman floated before his eyes. Her eyes were brilliant with anger, but there were no tears.

A man with a close-cropped beard took her place, and what he did hurt Carmody so much he retreated to a dark place where he felt no pain, but where he hoped the woman would find him.

WHEN she did not come to him, he opened his eyes to look for her and felt a hot slice of pain across his chest and found it difficult to breath because of tight bandages. A graying, motherly woman stood beside his bed, and next to her the bearded doctor.

"You made it," the doctor said, "and you're lucky. What's your name?"

"Carmody," Burch told him. "Where is she?"

"Your friend?" She left this morning when I told her you would get well."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days. You'll be here another week, at least. Mrs. Simms, here, will take care of you."

Carmody nodded. "I had a wallet. If he didn't take that—you're welcome to...."

"Your money's safe," the doctor said, nodding toward the corner dresser, "but the bill's all paid. Your friend took care of that."

"That was nice of her," Carmody said. "Did she say who she was?"

"Why, she's Lisa MacMillan," the doctor said, astonished. "Didn't you know?"

"No," admitted Carmody. "Did she say where she was going?"

"Prairie City. She said a letter would reach her there. She said that, when you got home, if you ever made up your mind what you wanted to do, to let her know."

"I'll write her a letter now," said Carmody.

"Plenty of time," the doctor said. "Take it easy."

"Now," Carmody said.

Mrs. Simms brought a tablet and pen and sat down beside the bed.

"Dear Lisa," Carmody told her to write. "I can't go home for two reasons. First, I have no home; that's what I'm looking for. Second, if I had a home I couldn't go back without first seeing Charley Hess. You'll understand why I have to do that. Please let me know where I can find you in Prairie City. I will be there soon. With all my respect." When Mrs. Simms handed him the tablet he signed, "Burch Carmody" in a bold but shaky hand.

His terrible impatience to be able to move on when the word came gave Carmody the patience to lie quiet and do exactly as the doctor told him to do. But no word came and the quickness with which his wound had started to heal slowed until the doctor grew worried again. Mrs. Simms' practical mind solved that problem.

"My sister Carrie's married to a brakeman who makes the run to Prairie City," she told Carmody. "I can tell you about that MacMillan woman."

"Tell me," Carmody ordered.

"She runs a place there. Lisa's Place. Gambling and drinking. She caters mostly to the brand owners who have come up with their Texas herds. The ordinary drovers can't offord her style. And every cent she makes she's using to buy other businesses south of the tracks. Prairie City is going to be a division point on the road, and she's saying that she'll soon be making a tremendous amount of money. I reckon she must have it in for men folks."

"No," said Carmody. "She's just afraid of herself. Next time you see your brother-in-law, ask him if he knows a man named Charley Hess."

"I know about that rascal," said Mrs. Simms. "He's the other half of what's wrong with Prairie City. Folks there are wondering how Hess will trip Lisa up to get her half, or whether she'll marry him to get his. Something's bound to happen."

"That's true, I guess," Carmody said. "Tell the doctor I'll be leaving in a few days."

The doctor turned him loose in a week with a warning. "Take it easy for a while. In time you'll be all right."

"It might," Carmody said, "be too late even now."

PRAIRIE CITY had two main streets divided from each other by the raised embankment of the railroad right of way and its flanking string of scarred and gunshot telegraph poles. The south side buildings were weathered and unpainted, as if there had been no time to do that in the beginning and no use in doing it now.

Beyond the town, switch engines panted and puffed, shunting long strings of cattle cars alongside the loading pens.

Standing on the right-of-way embankment, Carmody spotted Lisa's Place, a fifty-foot wide, false-fronted building at the street's east end. At least a dozen saddled horses stood hipshot at the rack before the door.

A block west of Lisa's and across a narrow cross street, the name of Hess appeared upon a corner building, the biggest place in town. After studying that, Carmody walked down, found a north side barber shop, had his hair cut, got a shave and a bath and rented a room in the hotel. At four o'clock, when he came back through the lobby, a big pistol, with an army brand mark still showing on the worn butt plates, rode in a holster at his right hip.

Carmody crossed the tracks and went directly toward the corner saloon. There he found Hess standing in the doorway, flanked on each side by an armed man. A handful of substantial looking but dispirited citizens stood on the walk facing Hess. He had a deck of cards in his hands and shuffled them slowly as he looked contemptuously down upon his visitors.

"Come back any time you want a drink or a game or whatever," he told them, "but don't ever come here and try to tell me how to run my business," he was saying.

Carmody did not have time for that. He stepped to one side and called, "Hess!"

Hess turned his head and stared and a card fell from his hand, fluttering.

"It's me," Carmody said. "You didn't kill me back in Coldwater, but you're too much of a yellow skunk not to try it again. This time I'll be able to smell you coming. I just wanted to tell you."

Slowly, Hess stopped shuffling his cards. Perspiration popped out on his forehead, but he made no motion to relieve himself of that nuisance, nor did he made any sign to the armed men beside him. With a sudden laugh he said, "Let him have his fun, boys," and then he turned and went back inside.

Carmody wheeled away, disappointed. He thought that calling Hess out in the open would make it impossible for Hess to back down, but he had misjudged the man. And now, with no other way to force the issue, he would have to wait until Hess shot first.

Before he had walked a dozen steps the men who had called on Hess were around him. One of them, a round-faced man of about forty, gripped Carmody's arm and said, "Wait a minute, friend. We're looking for a man. A man who's not afraid of Charley Hess."

Carmody looked down toward Lisa's place and shook his head impatiently. "Then I'm not the man you're looking for. I'm afraid of Hess."

"Put it another way," the round-faced man insisted. "I'm Daniel Callahan, the mayor of this town. We're looking for a man who's not afraid to wear a badge on his coat, even if he is afraid of Hess. Will you come to my place and talk it over?"

Carmody recalled that town where he had watched Lisa MacMillan and Hess being put aboard the train. "Why not?" he said.

A HALF hour later he stood in the back room of Callahan's store and looked at Callahan and his friends. A silver star lay in the palm of Carmody's right hand.

"If I put this on," he said, "what will you expect of me?"

"The law enforced," said Callahan. "And we have a law that says every saloon and gambling place closes at two in the morning."

"Anybody ever try to enforce that law?"

"A half dozen men. We don't want tries, Carmody—we want it done."

"What makes you think I could do it?" Carmody wanted to know.

"I don't know," Callahan admitted, brutally frank. "You don't look like much, but you sounded like something when you called Hess. I think you have a little leather in your soul."

"Another thing we want," a man pointed out. "We want those Texas crews to stop roaring in here and shooting up the north side just because they got an itch. We want the whole business stopped. This is a decent town."

Carmody looked at them coldly and bounced the badge high in the air. When he caught it again he pinned it on his coat.

"I'll want no interference," he said, "and don't ask for any favors for yourself or your friends. And don't tell me how I ought to go about my business to get results. If you knew, you wouldn't have had to hire me. Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Carmody went directly to Lisa's Place. The bar ran down the right hand wall and against the left wall were tables. There were more tables in the back, each with an overhanging lamp. Two of these tables now were circled by tall, bronzed men who played with a reckless air of authority and affluence. These, Carmody hoped, were the brand owners Mrs. Simms had mentioned. Lisa, in a flame red dress, stood watching the play.

The bartender rapped a warning when he saw Carmody start back. Lisa heard it and turned, and stood there a moment, the color draining from her cheeks.

She met Carmody a dozen steps away from the tables, her unsettled glance straying from his face to the star on his coat and back again. "You should not have come here," she finally said.

"You should have answered my letter," Carmody reminded her. "Not answering it didn't fit in with what the doctor said you told him to tell me."

"You didn't go home," she pointed out. "You wouldn't leave well enough alone."

"I'm home now," Carmody said, unconsciously touching the badge on his coat. "I never felt so much at home in my life. Those fellows back there the big wheels from the trailherds?"

"They are," said Lisa, sharply. "And you leave them alone. Don't let that tin badge go to your head. It was bad enough getting yourself hurt over me—you ought to draw the line, someplace. Don't be a complete fool."

"When I draw the line," Carmody said, "I'll make it sharp enough for both of us." Then he walked past her and up to the tables and said, "Gentlemen, who's the big man here? Who do you all ask for advice?"

Eleven heads turned toward one man, a tall, lean, gray man with a hawk nose and deep-set blue eyes. He easily accepted the responsibility placed on him now. "I'm Colonel Taber," he said. "What was it you wanted, Marshal?"

"Cooperation," Carmody said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd spread the word about no more shooting when your men ride in for a drink and a go at the town. They're to come in here quietly. If they don't, I'll have to take their guns away from them."

The ghost of a smile touched the Texan's lips. "Kind of a big order on both ends," he said. "Those boys have been three months in the saddle; they're young, mostly, and when they hit town they just naturally start in—"

"I'm not interested in causes," Carmody said, cutting across the drover's words. "No more shooting up the town. Get word to them before somebody gets hurt. When they come in tonight, I'll be waiting to enforce that order."

A chuckle started around the tables, but Taber did not join in. He looked Carmody up and down, and when he spoke his voice had a cold edge. "Suppose," he said, "I lead my own crew in here tonight and we come in shooting off the roofs? What would you do? One man."

"Taber," Carmody said, quietly, "if you lead your men in shooting, after what I've just told you, you'll realize what a high

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prize you paid for your pride just before you hit the dust, dead."

Taber suddenly flashed a reckless smile. "I believe you'd try it at that, Rawhide," he said. "We'll see." He turned back to his cards.

Carmody looked around at Lisa. "Close up at two o'clock tonight, Lisa," he said. "That's the law."

Her quick anger flared and pushed against Carmody and accomplished nothing. "I'll close if everyone else closes," was all she said.

"Everyone who stays open will be in the same boat," he told her, and walked out, only to turn around and go back in and hand Lisa a hundred dollars. "For what you paid the doctor in Coldwater," he said. "I don't take favors."

It took until after sundown to carry the order to every man who ran a business along the street and in the dark houses fronting the back alleys. And from every man he got the same answer Lisa had voiced, "I'll close if the rest of them do." Carmody did not bother to tell Hess. He wanted Hess to break the law.

The cattle crews came in from the holding grounds, and not a gun was fired. That in itself brought a growing tension to the south side of town. It seemed almost too much for one man to accomplish in so short a time, and it had its effect on the south side's profits. Men drank slower and talked more about "the new man" and waited for a look at him.

Carmody made it his business to keep out of sight. At eight o'clock, a passenger train pulled in from the East, left its quota of homesteaders and rolled on, still crowded with construction men bound for the road building farther west. At midnight a long cattle train crept out onto the main line and started east with its forlornly bawling cargo. The long-drawn whistle of the engine floating through the dark made Carmody feel lonely and alone.

The north side lights were all out now, but the south side still glowed brilliantly and spewed out its noise. A strong wind came in from the east, sending scraps of paper and dust scudding along the street. Two o'clock came and there was no change except at Hess' place. Hess closed at two and the lights in his building went out. Dan Callahan, the mayor, found Carmody standing in the shadow of the railroad embankment, his head down.

"Don't feel bad about it, Carmody," Callahan said. "We're thankful you kept the drovers in hand—we don't expect miracles. At least Hess closed."

"It was Lisa who put a word in to keep the Texans quiet," Carmody said. "Hess closed because his men couldn't find me tonight. So I've done nothing yet, but I'm going to. Go home, Callahan."

Callahan stiffened and prepared to argue, thought better of it and turned away. When he was gone, Carmody walked down to Lisa's, the last building at the street's west end. Two lamps hung in brackets beside the door. Wrenching one of these down, Carmody carried it inside.

The back part of the room was jammed and they were waiting for him; they had been waiting for the last half hour, wondering what he would do. Lisa came halfway up the room and stopped, nervously twisting a handkerchief she carried in her hands.

"Is there a back door to this place, Lisa?" Carmody asked.

"Two of them," she told him. "What's the lamp for? You trying to see the light?"

The bartender started to laugh, then turned it into a high yell as Carmody raised the lamp and hurled it to the floor. The oil bowl broke, the coal oil spilled out over the dry floor and the still burning wick set it on fire. A pool of flame spread quickly, and when it soared high enough so that Carmody could no longer see the look on Lisa's face, he turned and walked outside and over to the shadow of the embankment.

MEN RAN out from behind Lisa's place, shouting at one another and pulling their horses from the rack along the street. Mounted, they began riding up and down, calling to men who ran from other buildings, telling them what Carmody had done.

Flame broke through the wall of Lisa's building and caught the place next door. It was fanned by the strong east wind, and there was no stopping it. After a halfhearted attempt to start a bucket brigade, men gave it up.

Carmody moved slowly along in the shadow of the embankment, keeping ahead of the firelight. Occasionally a man would call down to him from the tracks above, but he

did not answer. He had not seen Lisa, and when he saw Taber ride slowly past him, he called for the man to stop.

"Been looking for you, Rawhide," said Taber. "Anytime you want to work for me, let me know."

"Thanks," Carmody said. "Is Lisa all right?"

"She's all right," Taber said. "Don't worry about her. Anything I can do for you, Marshal?"

"Yes," Carmody said. "Find Charley Hess for me and tell him where I'm standing. Tell him his place is going to go, too, and it's my fault."

"Be glad to," Taber told him, loping away.

Lisa's building and the one next to it were already gone. The building across the street from Hess' corner caught, and the lights were on in Hess' now and men were carrying things out into the safety of the street. By the light of the towering flames, Carmody saw Taber enter Hess' place, then come out again, mount and ride off into the shadows.

Then Hess appeared and Carmody settled himself, waiting.

Fifty feet away Hess stopped and said, "You went too far, Carmody."

"Sorry I had to," Carmody murmured. "I didn't want to, but you and your kind pushed me into it. Remember how I tried to explain it to you, Hess. A man never decides a thing alone—somebody else always horns in. If you hadn't been so yellow when I called you out, this would not have happened—you might have killed me. Now it doesn't make any difference whether you do or not."

Hess said, "All right," loudly, and a gun blazed behind and above Carmody. Hess leaned forward, chuckling, waiting for Carmody to fall, but Taber's voice, coming from the embankment, straightened the big gambler.

Taber said, "It's up to you now, Hess! This bushwhacker business up here didn't work out for you."

Hess cursed and whipped out his gun. Carmody let him have the first shot and then let him live long enough to get his pistol cocked again, then he killed him.

"For the Lord's sake, Rawhide!" swore Taber, from his position on the tracks. "Don't ever give a man a chance like that!"

"He was something special," Carmody muttered. "I owed him a favor."

The fire was almost burned out at the west end of the street, and Carmody was surprised to find the day had dawned. When he turned and looked up and saw Daniel Callahan, the mayor, looking sourly down at him, he unpinned his star and tossed it up. "I don't need this any more and you don't need me," Carmody said slowly, "It's all over."

Callahan clenched the star in his fist and said, his voice thick with anger, "Damn you, Carmody, you didn't have to be so tough about it. People asleep in those buildings could have been hurt."

"Nobody," said Carmody, "ever slept by night over there, and you know it. And starting it at Lisa's place gave everyone else plenty of time to get away. I'm not a complete fool."

Bone weary and feeling sick, Carmody climbed the embankment, brushed past Callahan without speaking further to him, and headed for his hotel. Stumbling blindly across the lobby, he lifted himself up the stairs and entered his room. Lisa sat there on his bed, her gray coat hanging over her shoulders and her packed valise resting on her lap.

After looking at him a long time, Lisa said, bitterly, "What did you do it for, Burch? Why did you mark yourself that way? From now on, wherever there's trouble, little men will come running for Burch Carmody to fix it for them."

"Is that all you're worrying about?" Carmody asked her. "Me?"

"Was there anyone hurt across the tracks?" she asked, evading him.

"No one but you and Hess," Carmody told her. "Hess is dead."

Lisa stood up and tossed her valise onto the bed. "There'll be other Hesses, other towns. What will you do?"

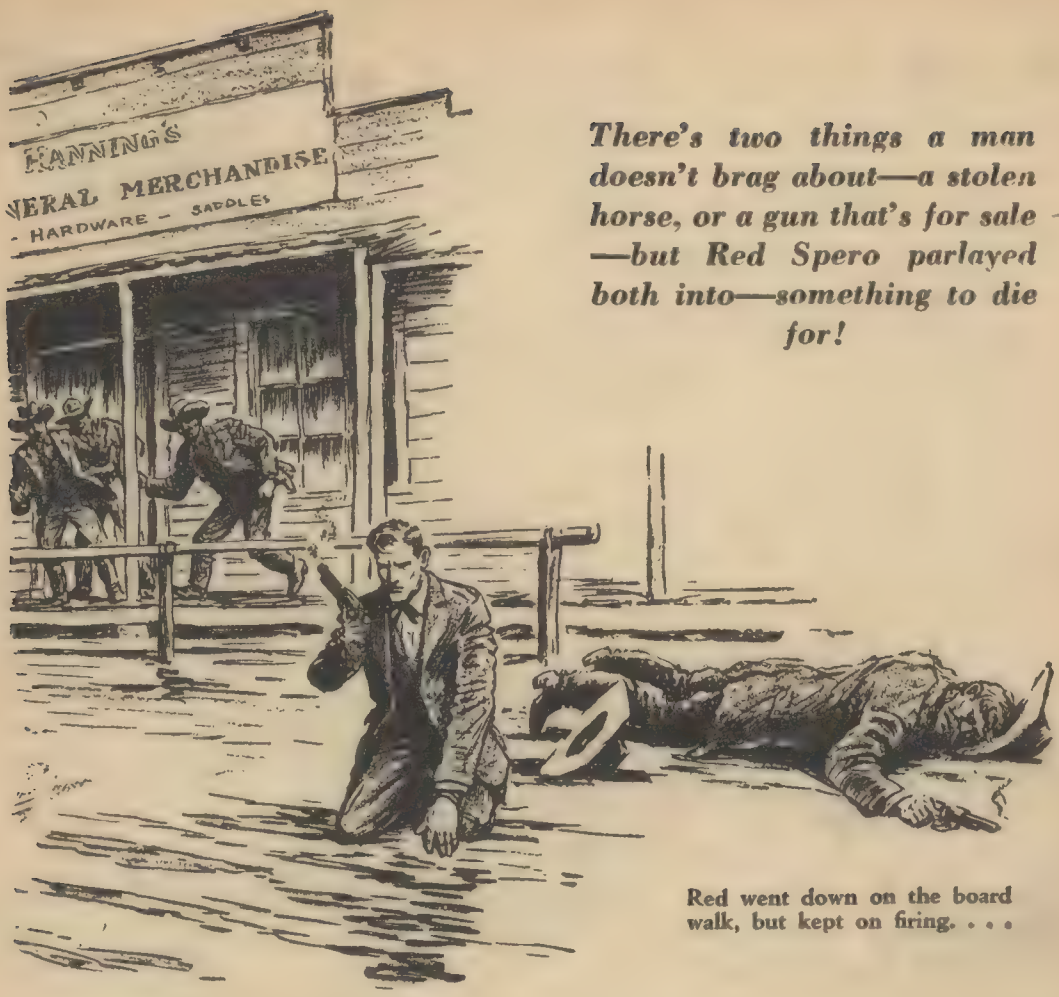
"Always come back to you. Always manage to find you, somehow."

Lisa came slowly toward him. "You told me on the train that some women seemed hellbent on drawing the wildness out of a man and that the ones who do that get hurt. You were so right, but I'm never going to cry over it—never when you're looking at me."

"Then you'll never cry again," said Burch, reaching for her.

Sudden Six Crossing

By MARVIN DE VRIES



There's two things a man doesn't brag about—a stolen horse, or a gun that's for sale ——but Red Spero parlayed both into—something to die for!

Red went down on the board walk, but kept on firing. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

When Gunslingers Meet

RED SPERO was on his way to Gun Plains. He had bad weather at his back, night in his face, and a sorry nag under him. The sorry nag was his own fault, although he allowed a man who stole a horse couldn't be too choosy, especially when he was in a hurry. Gun Plains was his old home town, but he didn't brag about it, and, he was certain sure, Gun Plains didn't either. More to the point, he was sure no one would recognize him after all these years, unless it might be Burr Maslon, the old town marshal. It was a chance he had to take, because he had a chore to do, and it didn't seem like a big chance. The years had changed him from a gawky kid, full of blurt and bombast, to a hard-bitten, gun-quick Mississippi River hellion, a transformation that sometimes put a bleak frown on his dark face, especially when bad weather caught him short of comfort.

He had come a long poke over the Ozarks. It was Saturday night. In a nameless town back yonder he had posted a letter to Beau Ganges, who was hiring him, stating he would arrive on Saturday without fail.

> I'll take the cash in small currency. Have it ready. I'm not going to be hanging around the place. I don't know who Kim Aintree is, but he's dead enough for your five hundred. Don't try to short-change me, Ganges. I know you.

He was behind schedule because of the weather, but he had only fifteen or twenty miles left to go, and he could make it on time. He needed that cash. A long run of bad luck had turned him seedy—seedy boots, seedy saddle, seedy horses to ride—but the chore ahead was his chance to set

himself up in sporting company again.

Then his horse gave out entirely, and he had to get down and hoof it through tall, frozen grass that crackled like glass every time he took a step. Knowing, from old times, exactly where he was, he made up his mind to head for the old Sterling place. As he recalled, it was a kind of disaster place and had been abandoned for years, until old Jay Karr, who owned the O-Bar-O at the time, bought it up and added it to his range. So far as he knew, the old log house still stood, and he figured he could find some comfort there for the night.

He had more than a mile of bad going, and when he arrived he found the place was occupied. Smoke and a scatter of sparks came out of the stone chimney. The light showing through the chinks in the logs vanished suddenly when the crunch of his boots sounded in the brush-choked yard. He swore, then raised his voice and hailed the tumble-down house.

He got a grudging answer in return from the dark of the doorway.

"I thought this place was deserted," Spero called, walking that way.

"It was till I got here," the other answered, "an' I ain't permanent. I just holed up on account of the weather." He holstered his gun unobtrusively, stepped aside and touched a match to the nub of candle. "I'm bound for Gun Plains."

Red Spero moved to the fire and put his back to the heat. He saw at a glance that Gun Plains was getting a double dose of unpleasant company. He tried briefly to figure out what gave a man of their stripe away, but couldn't arrive at a conclusion. *I've seen this boxhead before,* he told himself, and waited for it to come to him. He had a habit of noticing law dodgers, and finally pulled the right one out of his brain file. *Dunner,* he thought, *Jake Dunner, alias Ozark Jake, alias Dunn Jacobs.* "Sit down, Jake," he drawled. "Don't stand on ceremony."

"Okay, Spero," Dunner answered him, and both of them laughed, an uneasy sound soon lost in the wide cavern of the room. But he didn't sit down. He took a turn around the moldy table, patting the seat of his pants and pulling the sleazy cloth away from his hide. "I've been sittin' in a puddle all day."

"Must be important business we both got in Gun Plains," Red Spero remarked.

"Mine is," Dunner stated, his jaws clamping suddenly.

Spero grinned. "You broke, too?"

Dunner shook his head. "Cash don't concern me."

"Oh, come now, don't give me that."

"You asked." Dunner had obviously kept out the cold with whiskey during the day, and his words came out a little numb.

"Just by way of conversation." Red Spero said, mildly. "You sure sound like you got somethin' stuck in your craw."

"I'll tell you my business," Dunner flared. "I'm goin' to Gun Plains to kill a man. A damned four-flushin' fancy Dan."

"My, you sure go overboard."

"All right—shut up."

RED SPERO chuckled, his opinion of Dunner declining to nothing. "I never could understand some of you gents with a mad on all the time," Spero went on. "What the hell, man? You can't cure everybody with lead."

"I'll cure Beau Ganges," Dunner muttered.

Spero perked up his ears. "Who?"

Dunner's jaws clamped shut again, and Spero turned to face the fire, hunkering down so he could put his frozen hands in under the stones. "I wish you'd saved some of that licker."

"Me too," Dunner agreed.

Dunner's slip was something to consider. Beau Ganges was the man who had hired Red Spero to kill Kim Aintree. For some reason, it was worth five hundred dollars to Ganges, but if he got killed before he paid off, Spero would be left holding the sack again. *I reckon I got to do something about it,* he thought. *Something he won't take to.* He worked his stiff fingers, and realized it would be some time before they would be of any use to him. In the meantime, with sly quiet skill, he got Dunner to unburden himself. It was a sad but old story. Dunner had once punched cows for Jay Karr on the O-Bar-O, and had taken a fancy to the two Karr kids, Julie and Chad, a real fancy that had never let him go. Even then Jay Karr was ailing, and he sometimes said to Dunner that if anything happened to him, the kids would have Dunner to take care of them.

"Well, Jay Karr went over, an' I hit the owlhoot, but I always kept track of them two buttons. Lately, Chad, the boy, wrote me that this Beau Ganges was putting pres-

sure on Julie to marry him. That galled me. I know Beau Ganges from way back. He was a smart river gambler to start with, and he learned fancy ways from quality folks. He took on their shine, but he stayed skunk. He's yaller and he's crooked and he's playing his hand to grab the O-Bar-O. The boy sounded like he needed help, an' the only kind of help I c'n give is to kill the buzzard. That's what I'm goin' to do. I won't shame her by lettin' on why. I'll just ride in an' ride out, an' that'll be it."

"You might not get very far out," Red Spero told him. "They got a marshal down there by the name of Burr Maslon. He's old, but he shoots strangers on sight."

"I scare to death of town marshals," Dunner answered in a bored voice.

Spero went over this again. He didn't intend to let Dunner mess up his play. He didn't want him anywhere near Gun Plains until he had finished his own gun chore and cleared out with his pay. After that, Dunner could go in and shoot up the total population if he had a mind to. But Spero, perhaps in a wry twist of professional courtesy, reconsidered his original intention and tentatively decided against it.

"Look, Dunner," he began, "this is funny. I know Beau Ganges. If somebody paid me to shoot him I would do it with the greatest pleasure myself. That's what I think of him, but he's going to owe me five hundred, and I aim to collect it before you take a whack at him. Ain't that reasonable?"

"Maybe." Dunner's voice sounded cold and uncompromising.

"So," Spero went on, "I'll go on in the morning and do my litle stint. Then you can come in on Monday and work off your mad."

Dunner suddenly shook his head. "No. I don't wait for nothin'. What d'you think I am?"

"I don't know," Spero answered, still reasonably amiable. "I'm tryin' to find out. You better think it over."

"Don't threaten me," Dunner muttered irritably.

"Didn't mean to. Threats usually come from a man who wouldn't back 'em up. I back up my talk." He worked his fingers again, but wasn't satisfied.

Dunner wasn't an entire fool, and he probably was good with a gun or he wouldn't have lived as long as he had. Whiskey-soaked as he was, he still probably realized that only the man who got to Gun Plains first would have much chance of riding out again. After that, the place would crawl with armed bumpkins ready to shoot at anything that

moved. That was the way Dunner was thinking. Spero could read it in his eyes, and when he had read it, he went back to his original intention.

But Dunner made the first move, strolling off with seeming indolence to a dark corner. Spero shifted along the wall, then called softly, "Go ahead, Dunner. Try it."

Dunner twisted. His hand flashed, and Spero matched it. Both guns roared. Lead hissed past the stubby candle, throwing a sudden turmoil around it. The light nipped out. A body crashed down with the sudden, hard impact. A man's breath whistled faintly. Sleet raked the weather wall, clawing like a pet dog. Footsteps sounded, and then a hand, cupping a lit match, reached out and lit the candle again.

CHAPTER TWO

The Challenge

EVERY Saturday night there was a dance in the Oddfellows' Hall over Gurney's feed store, but Kim Aintree prowled the street by his lonesome with a dark scowl on his face, because Beau Ganges had taken Julie Karr to the dance. "It makes me feel awful," he told himself, "but I don't know what I can do about it."

It was far past darkfall. A hard wind was blowing, and a thin drizzle slanted down, turning to ice when it hit. The usual loose clapboards and window blinds set up their usual racket, and the usual feckless folk skittered around, contending with the wind with their usual last minute makeshifts. Pone Planter's fiddle screeched through the occasional lulls, and Kim tried to catch the figure, because he had dancing feet, at least when he danced with Julie Karr. But it wouldn't be tonight, and it might never be again, unless he could somehow get a stranglehold on the trouble that swirled around him.

Sleet ice glazed the weather walls of the buildings, and the buckboards along the street got a free varnish job. "It's a sorry outrage to let the horses stand out on a night like this," he muttered, and read the various brands as he went by. "Something ought to be done about it—and I know what."

His sympathy for the horses may have been the thing that set him in motion. Or the natural-born mischief in his makeup, or his overall crankiness at this particular time. At any rate, he drove the rigs to the livery barn one by one, unhitched the teams, threw the harness in a heap outside and ran the horses into the barn. Willy, the hostler, watched pop-eyed, and predicted that someone was going to catch hell. "Those fellers are all tightwads," he stated. "They never put their horses under cover."

"Time they started," Kim muttered.

"Since when did you get so almighty good, Kim?" Willy inquired.

"I'm not. I'm low and moody."

"Because you're not over to the dance?"

"That's part of it."

"I ain't either."

"You know what I mean."

"I reckon I do. I've told Julie I think it's a shame. Everybody thinks it's a shame."

"I expect we'll all get over it. Now get busy."

"I ain't got stalls for all them nags, Kim."

"They don't need stalls. Leave 'em on the runway, close all the doors and run for your life."

"This is going to be a mess," Willy muttered, shaking his head. "It'll take 'em a week to get 'em sorted out."

"A week well spent," Kim muttered. "Make the usual charge. I'm sure everybody will be glad to pay for the accommodation."

"Pay, hell," Willy mumbled. "They'll hang me."

The harness made a sizable heap of stiff, sleeted leather. Kim gave it a thoughtful prod with his boot, waved a hand at Willy, and started up the street again. What he had done improved his mood a little, but not much. It was like going to work at a mountain with a shovel. And in his case, the mountain had a hard core of real trouble that couldn't be budged.

It had started more than a month ago. Walking down this same street, in weather that wasn't much better than this, he had met Beau Ganges, and they stopped briefly to chat. Beau was mildly patronizing, but at the time it made Kim feel good to be noticed by a New Orleans aristocrat. Ganges said he understood Kim was a friend of the Karrs.

Kim nodded. "Chad's my friend. Julie—Julie's my—we're bespoken."

Ganges smiled indulgently. "She's a beautiful girl."

"I think so."

"And rich, I understand." Ganges smiled knowingly.

Kim flushed. "I s'pose."

"I've met your father," Ganges said. "He has a fine reputation around here. A fine doctor."

Kim flushed with pleasure. "I heard about you, too, from him. I've been working on the O-Bar-O. That's the Karr place."

"Yes, I know."

"They move into town in the fall, Chad and Julie, I mean, so I came back too."

"Don't blame you," Ganges smiled indulgently, and his glance moved down to the weapon Kim was wearing. Then, speaking only as a man of wide experience who wanted to be kind and instructive, he added, "Do you think you still ought to wear a gun, now that you're back in town?"

Kim shrugged, a little nettled. "It feels good."

They were standing near the vacant lot next to Gurney's Hardware. The wind made a hissing sound through the dead weeds. Ganges seemed to be talked out, and Kim stepped back to let him by. Politely, Ganges inclined his head. Then, like a streak of lightning, a gun flamed in the weeds, and the bullet took Kim's hat with it. Ganges ducked. Kim fired back, and thought he heard a shocked moan come out of the vacant lot, but he couldn't be sure. Ganges moved back and got behind the wall of the building. Kim circled the other way, skirting the saddlery until he reached the back alley. Then he cut back, and stepped into the tall weeds, gun cocked, trigger finger quivering, but his first shot had done the business. He almost stumbled over the limp body, and, with a sudden sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, discovered that it was his own best friend, Chad Karr. Chad was badly hurt. Blood poured from a wound in his back. Kim's first impulse was to pick him up and get him home. But there was something else to think about. What had Chad been up to with a bushwhack gun in his hands? Whom had he tried to kill? Why, of all things, would he take this shameful way of doing it?

Kim let him be and moved on, making the full circle until he got back to Ganges. "No luck," he muttered. "Did you see anybody?" He thought his voice sounded scared, but Ganges didn't seem to notice.

"No," Ganges answered, sounding a little scared himself. He didn't seem inclined to loiter here any longer, and with a few mumbled words that Kim didn't catch, he angled across the street.

As soon as he was out of sight, Kim went back. He thought Chad was dying, but he got him home, and his father spent the night over him. Kim got Julie, and after his father had done what he could they tried to puzzle out what Chad had been up to.

"I don't know what he was trying to do," Kim stated, "but I do know it's got to be kept secret. There's too much shame connected with it. He must've had a good reason, but we don't know what it was, and we won't likely find out until he can tell us. It's beyond me."

They talked until morning and hit on the idea that Chad had gone to visit cousins in New Orleans and would be away for some time. Julie went back to her own house on the hill, and the next morning Kim spread the news that some unknown bushwacker had taken a shot at him and let Burr Maslon, the town marshal, go to work on that.

But the secret didn't keep. Once again, Beau Ganges stopped Kim on the street and let him know that he knew what was going on. "I think it will blow over if we all keep our heads," he stated. "I surely hope so, especially for Julie's sake. I feel very strongly about that." He smiled disarmingly. "Maybe I shouldn't say so to you, Kim, but we ought to keep everything open and above board between us. I know you've always been fond of her, but sometimes a man can't help himself. Anyway, may the best man win." He held out his hand. "Let's shake on that."

Kim gaped blankly. He didn't take the hand. A deep frown creased his forehead as he went over the words again. "Why, she—she's mine now," was all he could find to say.

"I'm trying to change her mind, Kim," Ganges answered, his voice sounding wry and regretful. "But, as I say, may the best man win. No hard feelings, I hope."

"You can try," Kim flung back, sudden fury riding out with his voice. "You can try," he repeated, and stalked away.

"Remember this," Ganges called after him, sudden menace in his voice, "one word from me will blast Chad Karr clear out of this country. Keep out of my way, Kim Aintree!"

Kim had the last say. "Chad'll clear it up. Don't worry about that."

BUT CHAD didn't. Kim's father claimed he was partly paralyzed, and it might take a long time for him to get his speech back. At any rate, Chad hadn't moved a muscle or spoken a word from that day to this. . . .

That was why Beau Ganges was dancing with Julie Karr at the Oddfellows' Hall this Saturday night, while Kim Aintree prowled the street in cranky gloom.

Burr Maslon was in his office, wading through a batch of law dodgers, and Kim stopped in. "Almost any place is better'n outside," he remarked, sourly. "Kick me out if you don't want me."

"Sit down," Maslon invited. "Did you get all the horses under cover?"

"Yeah," Kim grinned sheepishly. "Nobody was supposed to see."

"Maybe I didn't," Maslon said. "It wasn't a bad idea, although everybody's supposed to be entitled to treat his own animals as mean as he pleases."

"I turned Willy pop-eyed."

Maslon laughed. "Willy lives pop-eyed. I s'pose you want to know if there's anything new on your case."

Kim shrugged. "Is there?"

"Nothing, except that I found your hat way down in Bone Creek. It's got a bullet-hole in it, but it won't talk."

"I reckon you might as well forget the whole thing, Marshal."

Maslon shook his head wryly. "That's hard for me to do. I expect I've been in this chair too long. Look here—" he held up one of the dodgers he had been looking over— "here's a dodger on a man by the name of Red Spero. He's thirty years old, and I was sitting in this chair when he was a kid in kneepants right here in this town. He's got to be quite a gunslinger, it says. Shows how time flies. . . ." His eyes fell to the dodger again. "But I reckon he's still got red hair. Why ain't you at the dance?"

"Didn't feel like it."

"Oh, quit that. You go on over there. What's the mater with you? You can beat that old peacock's time."

"I may drop over."

"You do that—right now."

Kim didn't promise, but he went outside. Probably on account of the weather, the dance was breaking up early, and a commotion was rising up and down the street about the horses. "I think you'll find your team at the livery," Kim informed one irate rancher. "Seems like I saw them go that way."

"Damned smart horses goin' that way all by themselves," the rancher grumbled. "Or didn't they?"

"You know your own horses best," Kim answered, and he walked on.

Old man Gurney was a big Oddfellow and let them use the second story of his building free of charge An open stairway slanted along one side, with a good-sized platform at the top. Several punchers Kim knew stood at the foot of the stairs, watching the couples come down. "Julie's still up there," someone told him with a kindly sound in his voice.

Yellow light poured down the steps and Kim backed away so he wouldn't be seen. Some of the boys laughed when a sudden updraft went up the steps and lifted silk and satin to uncommon heights. Kim didn't even bother to look. He watched the square of light at the top, his shoulders hunched against the wind, his hands dug deep into his pockets, a bright glow growing on his face, the warm inward glow of a man going humbly to his knees before an altar. He heard Julie's voice calling to someone left behind, and then she stepped outside.

"Here she comes," someone called back at Kim.

"I see her," Kim hissed.

Beau Ganges raised an umbrella over her head, said something that brought a faint smile to her face, and gave her his arm. She probably saw Kim, because she made a sudden impulsive gesture toward him with her hand. Halfway down, her skirt suddenly flew up, and the boys laughed again. A petticoat got hung up on a splinter, and Beau Ganges had to tussle with it. He took his time, elaborately overdoing his efforts, at least Kim thought so. It made him boil over, and he stepped forward and jerked the skirt out of Beau's hands and got it free.

Julie came down the remaining steps, leaving Ganges behind with the umbrella. "I'll see you home the rest of the way," Kim told her, his eyes flaming past her with a solid challenge at Beau Ganges.

"Kim, I think," she began quietly, "I—I think—"

"I'll walk you home," Kim broke in, and crooked his arm.

Her eyes were full of misgivings, but she took his arm. Beau came down the rest of the way, his face tight with anger. He lost control of the umbrella and it turned inside out, raising another laugh. With a savage mutter, he let it go down the wind. "Step aside," he told Kim, his voice quivering with rage.

Kim didn't budge, and Ganges struck him across the face with his limp fingers. It stung him raw, but he wouldn't let it pull him into a brawl with Julie to watch. "I'll see you later," he told Ganges.

"You certainly will," Ganges told him, following it with a swift rattle of words that brought a sudden startled oath out of one of the punchers. But Kim closed his ears to all of it, gave Julie his arm again and walked her away.

The footing was bad, and once she almost slipped off the edge of the board walk. Kim caught her suddenly and pulled her close. His lips brushed firm and hard against her cheek. Fire and swift ardor took hold of both of them as it had so often before, and he felt a stir of elation because something that sickened him, some shameful compromise, had come to an end. And he could tell from the bright shine in her eyes that she felt the same. She chuckled suddenly and said, "I didn't mind about my skirt, Kim."

"I know you didn't, and I didn't either. But he should have. It was his business to see you weren't shamed. If I'd been up there with you, nobody would've laughed. I wouldn't tolerate it, and they all know it."

The small smile stayed on her face. "You have better manners than he has, Kim."

"Certainly I have," he answered, and when he had said it, it put a laugh on his own face. "At any rate, the fat's in the fire now. He'll blow up about Chad, and it'll give Chad a black eye for the rest of his life. Bushwhacking is something a man can't live down. Never. And if Beau claims Chad was popping at him, Chad may even land in the jug. But I couldn't go on letting him run off with you, either."

"Of course not," she said with the same conviction.

Both of them were silent, savoring this deep affection that lay between them, something so deep and overwhelming there were no words to say what it was. Suddenly she stopped again. "What about the duel, Kim?"

"What duel?"

"He challenged you to a duel. That's what he was talking about. That was why he hit you that way."

"How about that? I never paid him any mind. A duel! I never hear of such a thing in all my life."

"You have to."

"Yeah, but not with me in it. He's a crack shot."

"I know he is," Julie said soberly.

"Did he say when?"

"Yes. Tomorrow noon. He said, 'High noon.'"

"What's the difference, noon or high noon? It's Sunday tomorrow anyway."

"You won't do it, will you, Kim."

"Of course not. I never shot a man in my whole life, except Chad—" he gulped suddenly— "and that's enough." Then a frown settled on his forehead, and he was lost in thought for a long time. At last he spoke up again, "I don't rightly know the ins and outs of those affairs, but I reckon I'll be obliged to go through with it, Julie."

CHAPTER THREE

Sunday in Hell

AS USUAL, when he got home, Kim looked in on Chad Karr. It tore him to pieces every time he saw what he had done, and he clung desperately to the hope that somehow time would set it all right. The bullet had grazed the spine, producing some kind of paralysis that was as close to death as he had ever seen. He held the lamp high and, all at once, noticed that something had changed. Chad's eyes were open, and, when Kim moved the lamp, they followed the light back and forth.

"I got trouble talking," Chad said. "What's wrong with me?" It was hardly more than a whisper, but it sounded like an explosion to Kim.

"Lord's sake!" he breathed. "It sounds good to me!" He set the lamp down and got on his knees beside the bed. "Damned if I couldn't weep," he said.

Chad had lost all track of time and thought it was still the same night he had made his puzzling bushwhack play. "I sure messed that up, didn't I?" he muttered.

"You sure did," Kim agreed, shaking his

head. "What on earth were you trying to do?"

"I was trying to kill Beau Ganges."

"That's what I thought," Kim muttered.

"How did I do?"

"Not so good. What on earth got into you?"

"I was obliged to do it, Kim. It was the only way. He's a no good packet boat tinhorn, putting on airs to make our eyes bug out. I found that out from Jake Dunner, who used to ride for pop on the O-Bar-O. Jake got into some private trouble and had to dig out, but he always kept in touch with us. He wrote to me from St. Louis, saying he'd found out Beau Ganges had set out for Gun Plains with his sights on the O-Bar-O. Jake said he was plain skunk and I wasn't to let Julie out of my sight till he could get here and take a hand." Chad rested a moment, then went on. "He said Ganges had left a lot of brag behind up there on the river, and that I was to keep an eye on Julie's beau—because Ganges would get him bushwhacked some way if he stood in his way. So that's what I did, and this is what I got into."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You go off half-cocked about anything that concerns Julie, Kim, you know that."

"I reckon I do," Kim agreed glumly.

"Holy Smokes! I ought to've had ten eyes. I searched his room at the hotel. You ought to see the fancy dueling pistols he's got up there in a velvet case."

"Give me time," Kim muttered.

"At any rate, what Jake said proved out. I found a dodger up there with Beau Ganges' name on it, and something else that gave me the frights. It was a letter from a man by the name of Red Spero, telling Ganges he wouldn't do any of his dirty gun chores for any hundred bucks. He wanted five hundred. 'I don't know who Kim Aintress is', it read, 'but he ought to be worth five hundred bucks. Otherwise, go after him yourself.' That cooked me. I almost got caught up there. I had to go out the window."

"Why didn't you go to Maslon with all that?"

"I didn't have time. That all happened tonight."

Tonight, minus two weeks, Kim thought.

"Don't think he doesn't wear a gun," Chad went on. "A little bit of a thing he can carry in some kind of a contraption in his sleeve. He didn't stay up there very long. When he came down he asked Pudge Riley, who was clerking, where he was apt to find me. Pudge told him I was likely to be at home, but he didn't go that way. That was just a red herring so he would have an alibi later. He went toward Charlie's. He'd probably seen you over there earlier. I trailed him. Once he stepped off the walk and stood in the doorway of Tinch's Saddlery a while, but he finally went on. Then he met you near Gurney's, and I knew the fat was in the fire. I skinned around behind and saw him go for his gun. That's when I fired. I s'pose the damned bullet made a circle and hit me in the back."

"No," Kim said, "it didn't do that." How much of this was true and how much of it was built up out of Chad's growing fears, he couldn't say. Had Ganges actually tried to kill him out there on the street that windy night two weeks ago?

Whatever was true, Chad had done all the talking he meant to do for now. His eyes closed, his head slumped, and he fell into a sound sleep. Kim tiptoed out, both relieved and concerned. "There's one thing about it," he muttered as he got into bed, "I'm sure going to get a look at one of those dueling pistols before long."

The next morning, the church bell clanged in a clear bright sky. Beau Ganges, still steeped in the fumes of sleep, came to the window and looked out.

Glancing up Beech Street, he saw Kim Aintree chopping ice off the front walk, and a dark frown settled on his face. Morning was about the only time Beau Ganges met himself face to face, and it was always a painful session. *If that damned Spero had kept his word and gotten here yesterday like he promised,* he thought, *I wouldn't be in this fix now.*

He glanced at his dueling pistols, and a tic clutched at his lips. The situation last night, according to the most standards of the best people, required a challenge, and he had challenged Kim Aintre. But he hadn't expected to be obliged to fight it. He had figured, even when he spoke, that Red Spero was somewhere in town, waiting for a chance to pick off the bumptious young fool. But Spero had failed him, and there stood Kim Aintree, prodding at ice on the front walk as if he had all day to do it and nothing on his mind.

Beau Ganges felt differently, and, in the

morning, he didn't try to fool himself. He was by far the best shot in town—at targets, but it was all show. He didn't have the stomach to face lead, and he knew it. He had tried it once with a young popinjay on a St. Louis wharf, and had fainted dead away before the shooting started.

He picked up one of the two dueling pistols he used for target practice and hefted it in his hand. It was a beautiful weapon, and, if all the amenities of dueling were to be observed, Kim Aintree would use its mate. But these Gun Plains hicks didn't know the fundamentals, and when the time came Aintree would step into the street and meet him with a .45. For a while he considered the idea that Kim might back out, but he threw it aside. A sudden chill hit him, shaking him from head to foot, and he flung the weapon on the bed with exasperated fury.

HE PULLED on some clothes and went back to the window. The ice had turned to slush and lost its shine. The parson's flock were leaving him at the church door and coming down the walk. But they didn't go home. They scattered along the walk, hunting places of vantage and safety where they could see everything and not get hit.

"First duel I ever seen," someone called from the far side of the street. "Pretty damn fancy doin's."

"I hope Kim drills that fancy son good, don't you?" an answer came back.

"It don't seem reasonable he would," another chimed in.

"The damned clodhoppers!" Beau Ganges rasped. He started to turn away from the window, but a sudden shard of light, bouncing off a gun or a piece of saddle metal, caught his eye, and, for the first time he noticed the lone horseman coming toward town. He thought, *It's got to be Red Spero.*

The rider took his time, up and down the folded hills, turning this way and that to look at the country, pulling up once on a high hill to look down at the town. At last he disappeared into the depression Bone Creek had cut for itself, and when he came out at the near edge Ganges recognized him positively. It was Red Spero, a day late for no particular reason at all most likely, and Beau cursed him again for his tardiness.

Kim Aintree came up the street, staring sheepishly back at the crowd. When he passed the marshal's office, Maslon came out, followed by four ranchers. They stopped Kim and, after a short argument, they headed for the livery barn together. Kim went grudgingly, but Maslon took him by the arm and led him on. Willy came out, and Maslon put some questions to him. Willy answered them with seeming reluctance, and another argument developed. Maslon pointed

(Continued on following page)

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 35)

1. The word "savvy" comes from the Spanish *Quien sabe,* which means "Who knows?"

2. When a tenderfoot rider stands up in his saddle (to save wear and tear on the posterior) he is said to be saving saddle leather.

3. True. A "side jockey" is a leather side extension found on the seat of a saddle.

4. A sin-buster is a minister or preacher.

5. In the Old West the term "stack" was often used in reference to a haystack.

6. In the slanguage of the Westerner, "staked to a fill," means given a good meal.

7. If the ranch boss told you to saddle up a Sunday horse, you should saddle up one with an easy gait.

8. When a horse is said to be "sunfishing," he, while bucking, twists his body from left to right on alternate bucks.

9. A horse is said to be tender when it has saddlesores or sore feet.

10. False. A "Texas gate" is a poorly made gate utilizing a pole and some barbed wire.

11. True. A *tobiano* is a type of pinto.

12. A "top railer" is one who sits on the top rail of a corral and gives his advice.

13. An under-bit is a type of earmark.

14. In a typical tying down operation, the cowpoke will tie three of the animal's feet.

15. True. The cowpoke slang term "wind belly" is used in reference to an orphan calf.

16. True. "Windies" are cattle that have been driven from canyons and other relatively inaccessible places onto the plains.

17. In the slanguage of the Westerner, a "wood sheller" is one who cuts branding fuel and fence posts.

18. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "woolies," you should return with some sheep.

19. Yes. A "wring-tail"—that is, a horse that has the habit of twisting its tail—is often likely to make its rider nervous.

20. The Western slang term "yamping" means stealing

(Continued from preceding page)

at Kim several times and made threatening gestures with his finger. One of the ranchers took Kim by the collar and tried to rough him up, but Kim shook him off.

Beau kept track of the time. There was less than a half hour left before noon, and his nerves were beginning to scream. He loaded the dueling pistol, then flung it on the bed again, his hands slippery with sweat.

The argument at the livery barn was getting hotter. Willy, apparently, had finally put the finger on Kim.

Maslon looked at his watch and scratched his neck. Then he stepped forward again, whipping out a pair of handcuffs. Before Kim could move, he had clamped one of them onto his wrist and led him off to the pokey, holding the other bracelet in his hand.

Beau Ganges sagged with relief. He understood now why Maslon was making so much of this. It was his way of preventing the duel. He probably figured he was doing Kim a big favor by keeping him out of it.

Spero, riding in on his dun-colored horse, looked surprised at the Sunday morning crowd. He passed Maslon and Kim, and a faintly sardonic grin showed on his lips. Kim didn't look up, but Maslon did, and what he saw stopped him in his tracks. All at once, he let Kim go and angled toward Spero, calling him by name.

Spero quartered away, bringing his horse to the hitchrack. He said something to Maslon, but Maslon shook his head and kept on coming. Spero went off his horse on the far side and stayed there behind the animal. He yelled at Maslon again, then suddenly drew his gun and fired. Maslon got hit. Kim saw him sidestep and fire at the same time, but he went down in the watery slush. Spero climbed his horse again.

Maslon raised his head. "Get him, Kim! Get—" He slumped down again.

Kim, ready for the duel, was probably the only other armed man in town that morning, and Spero swung his horse straight at him. He might have heard Kim's name called, and some blustery notion to carry out the chore that had fetched him all this way might have taken hold of him. At any rate, he tried to ride him down, pouring lead as he came. The horse struck Kim on the shoulder, knocking him down, but Spero's lead didn't touch him. Slush splashed in his face, blinding him, but he rolled free and fired a shot, a hopelessly wild shot that might have gone straight up for all he knew. But it surprised him—and Spero, too. It lifted Spero clear out of the saddle and spilled him far and wide over the boardwalk.

He was on all fours on the board walk, firing with one hand until he began to sag off-balance, then pushing himself up again. It looked like he had a shattered jaw. Blood was dripping off his chin, and the wild sputter that came out of his throat turned to gibberish before it passed his lips. Then Kim hit him again, and brought his tirade to an end. The shot struck him dead center, throwing his head back, and his body followed it into the dead weeds on the far side of the board walk. Red Spero's luck had run out, and his life's blood went with it, just like Jake Dunner's had during the night at the Sterling Place. Spero didn't move again, and when Kim knew he wouldn't, he got up and gave the handcuff a rueful jangle.

"It's just noon, Kim," somebody told him.

"He's up there," Pudge Riley announced from the hotel gallery.

Kim leaned against an upright and waited while high noon went past. He waited past that, but Beau Ganges didn't come out. Julie came toward Kim, but someone caught her shoulders and held her back.

"He ain't comin'," a spectator called, a jeer in his voice. "I'll bet he ain't comin'."

"No," someone further down toward the livery barn called, pointing, "he ain't comin'. He's goin'."

Kim moved into the middle of the street. He saw Willy out in front of the barn, fists on his hips, looking off toward Bone Creek. All at once, he made a devastating motion with his hand, held his nose and went back into the barn as if he were looking for better air.

"Sneaked out the back way, the coward," Pudge Riley muttered with disappointment in his voice.

A laugh went up, and rippled up and down the street. It poured around Kim, and the spectators who were making it followed it in.

"That kills him deader'n if he'd stood up to you, Kim," Pudge stated.

"Oh, I don't know," Kim answered with a suddenly soft voice.

Pudge leaned down and said in a softer voice, "Here comes Julie."

But the crowd heard it and smiled, and a path opened up for her straight to Kim.

Ross jerked the blindfold away and Big Black exploded. . . .

Some die of fear, some kill for it—and some ride it out to the last bitter showdown—win, lose—or fight!

THE ROUGH STRING

By LEWIS B. PATTEN

TED DALY, hating himself for doing it, slipped out of his seat before Miss Trent had quite finished the words, "Class dismissed," and made for the door like a cottontail scurrying to its burrow. Behind him he could hear the running feet of Clint Baggs, and the tittering of the girls. But he was faster than Clint. Unless Miss Trent called him back for rushing out this way, he had escaped Clint's large-knuckled, brutal fists for one more day.

He reached the door. Still Miss Trent had not called him back, and he leaped through it with a brief, deep feeling of re-

lief. A hasty glance over his shoulder showed him Clint, running, and Clint's gang, circling, trying to cut him off from his horse. But he had this little start, and fear lent him speed. He untied the reins with shaking fingers, mounted, and laid the ends of the reins frantically on the horse's rump, hearing the jeering cries of the other boys as he galloped toward the edge of town.

With the town behind him, he could safely drop back to a walk, and this he did, now feeling the shame and regret that always washed over him. Reason told him he should make a stand, that until he did Clint Baggs would keep him on the run, would keep this abject, crawling fear alive in him. He murmured, his face setting itself in grim lines, "Tomorrow, I got to fight him," but deep inside, he knew he would not. And there would come a day when Clint would corner him, and then. . . .

Twelve on his last birthday, Ted was small for his age, and slightly built. His hair, a tawny in-between color, neither brown nor blond, fell across his forehead in a lock that would not stay back, and stood straight out at the cowlick on the back of his head. But for all his smallness, he was active and fast, and would have made a match for Clint, had it not been for the fear that paralyzed him.

Clint Baggs, new to the town and the school this year, had started out to whip every boy in it. He had whipped a few, and then he had started on Ted, had made him run. Promptly then, he had forgotten the other boys, and had concentrated on making life miserable for Ted.

The ride to the ranch was a matter of two hours, and for the first half hour Ted's mind occupied itself with wishful thinking. Tomorrow—well, maybe not tomorrow, but soon—he'd be waiting when Clint Baggs rushed out of the door. He'd be standing there, scowling, and he'd say, "You thought I was scared, didn't you? Well, I ain't." He spent a few minutes on the details of the daydream, in which he licked Clint Baggs, then, with his cowardice vindicated by make believe, Ted's mind turned homeward, to other things, and excitement suddenly touched him. Today Frank Jennison, his father's foreman, and the crew, were to have brought home Big Black, the wild stallion, and his bunch of mares that they had successfully corraled over in the cedar breaks last week. Most of the mares were at least green-broke by now, but no one had ridden the stallion. That would be his father's job. Ted dug his heels into his aging horse, forced him into a sluggish trot.

Trotting and walking, walking and trotting, he came into the home ranch, sprawling in a haphazard fashion over five thousand acres of sagebrush flat, and went immediately to the corral, where there was rising dust, and the shrill nickering of horses, and the shouting laughter of the crew.

In the act of dismounting, Ted froze, eyes widening, his face going tight with awe. There, fenced behind an eight-foot wall of stout spruce poles, pranced the wild one, Big Black. His eyes were bulging with terror, his coat was gleaming black satin. With the grace and power of a mountain lion, he would almost crouch, and then would run at the fence that separated him from his mares, rearing against it, his sharp, small hoofs making the poles give and crack. Then he would come down, snort and rush away, only to try again.

Ted heard his father's voice through his entranced daze. "Some hoss, ain't he, Ted? Want to ride him tonight or wait 'till morning?"

The hands guffawed. Ted grinned shyly, but behind the grin was doubt and wonder. Was there an edge to their laughing? Did they know of Clint Baggs? Were they laughing because they had heard?

He decided not. Jud Gorse, the bronc buster, said loudly, "I wouldn't ride that damn outlaw fer a hundred dollars! Watch this." He opened the stout pole gate, and stepped in with the stallion, keeping a ready hand on the gate behind him.

Big Black didn't hesitate. Snorting, he rushed at Jud, and reaching him, reared, pawing, using his forefeet as a boxer uses his fists. Jud ducked out the gate, shooting the oak bar into place just as Big Black hit it, and it rattled and creaked with the impact. But it held. Big Black screamed his rage and frustration. Jud said, somewhat shakily, "See what I mean? That hoss'll kill somebody."

Frank Jennison, iron gray and shaggy as a grizzly in summer, standing close to Ted and his father, said, "Let me shoot that animal, Mr. Daly. Let me shoot him before he hurts somebody. Don't you try an' ride him."

Ted, wide-eyed, watched his father worriedly. Ross Daly, after a barely perceptible

hesitation, growled, "No. Broke, he'll be the finest thing this country ever saw, and he'll get a hundred just like him. I'll try him one of these days, Frank. I've got to try him out."

Frank Jennison walked away, shaking his head, and the crew began forking hay to the mares, carrying saddles to the tack room, drifting off in voluble conversation to the bunkhouse.

Ross Daly laid a hand on Ted's shoulder and asked, "How'd school go, son?" more out of habit than from any curiosity, and Ted replied with the same habitual disinterest, "All right." But his thoughts were saying, *How long'll it be before he hears about Clint? I got to stand up to Clint before he does.*

Away from school he could usually imagine himself making a stand, but tonight . . . . He ducked his head, broke away from his father and ran for the house. He was suddenly very ashamed in the face of his father's courage. Clint Baggs was not half so terrible as Big Black, yet his father talked of riding the outlaw, showing hardly more concern than he would talking of riding to town in the buckboard.

AS THE days wore on, however, and Ross Daly kept putting off his ride, Ted began to wonder. His father seemed to have increasingly important things to do, and they kept him from the corrals where Big Black still fidgeted and fought behind the poles.

Somehow, too, Clint Baggs and the rest of the kids in school heard about the stallion and began to taunt, "When's your pa goin' to ride that horse? Mebbe he's as yella as you are, an' scared to."

And Ted, safe from Clint until school was out in the afternoon, felt a helpless rage rising in him at the bully's jibes. "My pa ain't scared of nothin'!" he would reply. "He'll ride Big Black, an' he'll break him, too! You just wait an' see!"

Evenings, Clint kept trying to corner him, but Ted continued to elude him, saying to himself each time, "I got to fight him! I got to!"

On Thursday night, Clint tried a new tack. One of his gang pretended he had to go outside a minute or so before school let out. When Ted ran out, he was waiting, and he made a dive at Ted, intending to hold him for Clint. If he'd made it stick, then the whole bunch would have crowded around Ted, hustled him off to the river bottom where the teacher couldn't see them, and then Clint would have had the fight he'd been spoiling for.

Ted, quick and agile, dodged the boy, and so again made good his escape. But tonight the taunts hurled at him seemed unbearable.

"Yellabelly! Your pa's a yellabelly, too! Your whole family is a bunch of yellabellies! Come on back an' fight!"

With the beginning of anger stirring in him, Ted reined his horse to a brief stop. But when the pack yelled and ran toward him, he lost heart and went on. Resenting the added cause they had for taunting him, he wondered *Why don't pa ride Big Black? I know he ain't scared! I know he ain't!*

Ross Daly watched his son ride in, saw him pause at the corral for a look at Big Black. He had noticed his son's preoccupation of late, but had not commented on it, thinking, *If it's serious enough, he'll come to me with it.*

Now he muttered as Ted came toward him, "I've got to get time to ride that horse," and had the uneasy realization that he had been putting it off because he was afraid.

Ted paused before him embarrassedly, turning red. He stammered, something unintelligible, then blurted, "Pa, why don't you ride him? You scared of him?"

On the point of denying this, Ross observed the intent concentration in the boy's face, and realized in time, *It's not an idle question he's asking. For some reason it's important as hell to him.*

He said slowly, "I guess I am, Ted. I guess that's why I've been putting it off."

Disbelief came first to Ted's face. Then it seemed to sag into lines of complete despair. Ross felt obliged to explain, "Fear is nothin' to be ashamed of, boy. All of us have it. Nature provides fear so that animals, human and otherwise, will stay alive. Big Black is scared to death. If I opened the corral gate, his first instinct would be to escape. That would be fear working. But then he'd likely think of his mares. That's his responsibility. He'd overcome his fear thinking of it, and he'd probably stay long enough to tear down a few fences an' take the mares with him. I reckon I'll ride Big Black tomorrow. I guess I haven't been facin' facts. Once a man gets to avoidin'

things because he's afraid of them, then it's time for him to do somethin' about it."

He saw relief in Ted's face, and something that looked like determination. The boy grinned uncertainly at him, and Ross thought, *I'll get up at daylight. By the time he heads out for school, I'll have that job done.*

TED HEARD Ross get up as gray seeped over the horizon, staining the night sky with its drabness. Hastily he crammed himself into his clothes, tiptoed to the door and slipped out into the chill air. Down at the corral, he heard Big Black's nervous snorting, the pounding of his hoofs as he thundered around the tiny corral. He heard his father's soothing talk, and he ran, muttering softly, "Don't get on him 'till I get there, pa."

As he came to the corral fence, and crouched there, a rope snaked out and settled over Big Black's head. Screaming shrilly, the stallion charged the man, and Ross Daly scrambled over the fence, landing ten feet from Ted, not seeing him. He dallied the rope there and, circling the corral, climbed over and dropped again inside. Again, Ted heard a rope whisper as it was thrown, and again the stallion screamed and charged.

But this time, the first rope had brought him up short, and at that instant Ross Daly dallied the other rope, murmuring between his teeth, "All right. Now you know the feel of a rope. Let's see if you like a saddle as well."

Opening the gate, he carried his saddle inside. New fury seemed to inject itself into the stallion. Rearing and pawing, he fought with but one purpose, to break loose and destroy this man. The corral poles creaked and popped from the strain. Ted murmured, suddenly realizing that he was bathed with sweat, "Don't do it, pa! Don't do it! He'll kill you!" He had the urge to run, screaming, to rouse the crew, but he set his teeth and controlled it.

The ropes, tight about the stallion's neck, were shutting off his wind, and now his breathing came harshly from flaring nostrils. But he gave one last surge at Ross, putting all his strength in it, and with a report like that of a pistol, the rope snapped. Ross heard it, and dropped his saddle, kicking up dirt with his feet as he frantically lunged into a run.

Ted saw he would not make it, saw him dive to the ground, rolling. Vicious hoofs came down where he had fallen, and for a moment Ted thought the stallion had caught him. But Ross was up, running again, and this time he made it over the fence, a hair's breadth ahead of the maddened horse.

Ted heard his breathless, hoarse whisper, "To hell with you! I'll have Frank shoot you. Why should I get my neck broke to prove to myself I ain't afraid of you? I am scared of you, an' you know it, don't you?"

Ted thought suddenly, *He don't know I'm here, but if he did. . . .* Without thinking further, he ran softly and silently to the house. He went up on the porch, opened the door, slammed it without going in. Then, whistling, he made his way again toward the corral. Arriving there, he said, forcing concerned eagerness into his breathless voice, "You ain't rode him yet, have you pa? I wanted to see you do it. I got up early so's I could."

"Hell, I ain't gonna. . . ." Ross paused. "No, I ain't rode him yet, boy. But by all that's holy, I will! Right now!"

Tension started building in Ted as his father came back from the tack room with a couple of new ropes. What if pa was hurt, maybe even killed? Fear was a part of the instinct of self-preservation, pa had said. Maybe you shouldn't ignore it this way. He had the urge to call out, "Don't do it, pa!" But he kept his lips still.

ROSS DALY put another rope on Big Black and dallied it tight. He put a rope on Big Black's forefoot, and then, holding that rope in one hand, his saddle in the other, he approached cautiously. Big Black reared. As he came down, fidgeting for balance, Ross lunged back, taking a strain on the forefoot and spilling the horse neatly. Four times he spilled the stallion on the ground, and after the fourth, the horse stood trembling, breathing hard as he approached, moving as far from Ross as the ropes would allow.

Ross laid a hand on the stallion's neck. He snorted, and lunged against the ropes. His breathing was labored and came in shrill whistles. Ross touched his neck again. On went the hackamore and the horse whirled and lashed out with his heels. Ross jumped clear and spilled Big Black again with the rope on his forefoot. As the animal rose, on went the blanket and saddle.

Ted looked at his father's face. It was streaming sweat and was a ghastly gray. Big Black threw off the saddle and whirled, kicking it halfway across the corral. Swearing softly, Ross recovered it, carried it back. Again he spilled Big Black, and this time he got the saddle cinched.

Ted muttered seeing the way Big Black's eyes rolled at Ross, the way he tried to keep away. "You've got him scared of you now, pa," and, "Oh, Lordy, I wish this was over! I wish this was over!"

Now Ross got a gunnysack from the corral fence and flung it over Big Black's head in one motion that shut off the stallion's sight. He tied it down while the animal's muscles twitched and jumped. He said, hoarsely, his own breath coming in gasps, "He's ready to ride now, damn him! Wait 'till I get the ropes off!"

He went across the corral, loosened his dally there, and then went back and flung off both ropes. The horse fidgeted and snorted weakly, but his feet were anchored to that one spot by his blindness.

Now Ross shook loose the loop on his forefoot, and with one smooth motion, was in the saddle, his feet firmly anchored in the stirrups.

Ted thought he had seen a fight already. But as the blindfold came off, he changed his mind. For one instant, the horse stood motionless, and then he exploded.

Ted screamed, "Look out!" as the stallion reared, lost his balance from the unaccustomed weight on his back, and fell backwards with a crash. But Ross had ridden wild ones before, though never one so rough as this. He was out of the saddle, leaping aside, and when Big Black scrambled to his feet, Ross was again sitting the saddle.

Now the horse bucked around and around, crashing against the poles in an attempt to crush Ross's leg. But each time he hit, Ross jerked his leg free, raising it, and when Big Black would sheer away, down it would go again.

Ted thought it would never stop. Ross was unashamedly hanging onto the saddlehorn. Blood streamed out of his nostrils, bright red against the pallor of his face. But now, as the horse slowed, he raked him viciously with his spurs, from neck to flank.

The crew streamed out of the bunkhouse, ludicrous in their bright red flannels, pulling on jeans, rubbing sleep out of their eyes, yelling, "Ride 'im, boss! Yah-hoo! Ride him!"

Big Black was slowing. Even the spurs failed to urge him into renewed effort. He stopped, finally, his head hanging dejectedly. Ross yelled, triumph killing his utter fatigue. "Open the gate, damn it! Open the gate an' I'll give him a ride!"

Ted jumped to the gate and swung it open. Spurring again, Ross rode the stallion out and galloped off into the dawn.

Jud Gorse yelled, "By Golly, I told you jiggers the boss wasn't scared of him! By 'Mighty' I told you he'd ride 'im!"

Frank Jennison shook his shaggy head slowly, his face solemn. He murmured to Ted, "Your dad's a real one, boy. He was scared, half scared to death, but he rode him anyway. You been here watchin' all the time?"

Ted nodded. The crew trooped back to the bunkhouse, but he waited. His mind was busy, and suddenly he thought of Clint Baggs.

Today he'd fight Clint. Today he just had to fight Clint. But with the memory in him of how his own presence had stiffened his father's courage, he said to his father as Ross rode up, worn out, but grinning, "You s'pose you could come to town this afternoon an' pick me up?"

Ross stared uncomprehendingly for a moment, but something he saw in Ted's sober face checked his hasty refusal. He said, "Mebbe. Why?"

"I want to show you somethin'. You tie the buckboard down in that clump of willows in the river bottom behind the school an' watch. You just watch without lettin' nobody see you. Will you?"

Ross nodded and slid down off Big Black, who was now docile with exhaustion.

Nervousness began to build in Ted, just thinking of this afternoon. He thought he'd have the courage to fight Clint. But it didn't hurt a man to have someone watching to stiffen his back when it needed stiffening the most.

He went toward the house with Ross, and the thought occurred to him, *I don't have to run any more.*

A weight he had been carrying for a long time seemed to have abruptly vanished. He grinned up at Ross, and the two went together into the kitchen, drawn by the odor of bacon and flapjacks and coffee.

LAST BULLET • RANGE •

By RAY TOWNSEND

"Our blood runs the same, kid," Old Ben told his son over a smoking six—"but when you step in my boots you'll find they'll stand and fight!"

WHEN he reached the ranch house, Ben Thompson stepped quickly out of the saddle. He had stepped to the porch before he realized that the younger man who had ridden in beside him had made no move to dismount. He turned, studying the other, seeing the obstinate set of his jaw. And in this moment it came to Ben that here was another part of himself; that in Hal, his son, his own stubborn temper was at last meeting its counterpart.

He's too much of me! The thought sped through Ben's mind, and he would have spoken it, venting a part of that temper that had built within him during the ride out from town. But the sight of his foreman, Bart Ramsey, in the corral beyond, checked his anger.

He said only, "We'd better talk this thing out, boy. Come inside!"

"I don't see what there is to talk about, dad. You laid down the law and that's all there is to it." Hal Thompson stayed in the saddle.

"What would you have me do, boy?" Ben asked. "Give away every acre of ground I've worked thirty years for?"

"Nobody's asking you to give it away."

Ben took this, knowing he would have taken it from no other man alive.

Hal said, "All that Roberts and the farmers down in the flats are asking is that you let them winter their few head of stock in your South Valley." He would have reined away then, but Ben moved quickly down the steps, raising a hand to the bridle. There was sudden concern in the lined, questioning frown he gave his son.

"You say my South Valley—why is everything mine instead of ours? Why do you think I've spent all these years putting my life and every dime I could get my hands on into the ranch? I thought you knew that, Hal. I built Diamond for you! Not for a bunch of dirty-necked nesters!"

"There's no use talking about it," Hal said. "If you'll let go there, I'll see about that pasture fence."

"Damn it all, youngster! I've tried to tell you what those nesters are after!" Anger flared then, in spite of Ben's control. "They had their chance! Every damned one of them! We all started the same! But would they invest anything when times were tough? Hell, no! I'm the one that hung on, put every nickel back into the place when it looked like it would have been better to walk off and leave it! I built Diamond when the going was tough, and now they want the reward! They want to run their scrawny, sick cows on my grass, infect my stock!"

But it was no good. Ben knew that. The thought was there again as he looked at Hal: *He's too much of me.* Ben knew that even he could not fight his own obstinacy in the shape of this man sitting before him.

In town it had been the same. Worse, really, with the boy practically siding in with Lige Roberts and his broken-down crew against his own father. Ben's jaw clamped at the memory as he slammed into the big house.

He had ridden into town to see old Eli at the bank and had stopped in at the Longhorn Saloon for a short one before riding out again. And there he'd seen his own son, belly-up at the bar with the whining, rat-eyed Lige Roberts and Gimp MacDowell and two or three more of the trash element from the flats.

The shot slammed the air and Ben's horse reared beneath him . . .

Surprise had taken Ben so that for a moment he had been unable to answer—even when Roberts himself had dared to suggest that he and MacDowell and Yelovich run their mousey cattle into South Valley. His South Valley!

And Hal had just stood there, smiling and looking at him expectantly. Yes, expectantly, by thunder! Ben Thompson spat.

Even now, standing in the big front room of the ranch house, the memory of Lige Roberts' wheedling voice worked on Ben's rage. He had ordered Hal home in no uncertain terms then, paying no attention to the blood-drained whiteness of the younger man's face as he had slammed out of the saloon.

Nester cows in my South Valley! How do you like that, by thunder?

IN HIS absorption Ben had not noticed the girl who stood beside the big upright piano on the far side of the room, dust cloth in hand. She stirred now, a dark-haired girl, wearing a dress of light blue that accentuated the deeper blue of her eyes. Pertly young at twenty, Ellen Shaw wore a look of mingled curiosity and censure that went with the tilt of her head.

"Ben Thompson!" she said. "You can order the men about and be as grumpy as you please when you're outside, but I'm trying to make a civilized home of this house, and as long as I am, I'll thank you to leave your grouchiness in the yard and not come tracking it inside like so much gooey mud!"

Ben looked at the girl he had adopted fifteen years before, the daughter of an old friend who had been killed in the days when

Diamond had had to fight for a foothold. As she crossed the room toward him, mimicking the frown he felt suddenly upon his own face, he felt his anger begin to fade.

Too well Ben Thompson realized it did no good to deny the girl's insistent teasing.

"And you'll smile when you come home and sit in your chair," she continued, pulling him toward the deep leather chair beside the desk. "Even if you do feel like breaking Mister Hal Thompson's neck because he doesn't agree with you and would take it all out on me if I gave you half a chance! You're getting to be a regular grumpy old maid as it is, Ben Thompson! A frown is bad enough on a young man, but at your age it's downright dangerous!"

"At my age?" Ben resisted, halfway into the chair. But the pressure of the girl's two hands on his shoulders sent him into the seat. "I'll have you know—"

"—That I'm hardly in my prime!" she mocked, finishing his sentence for him. "I know, Uncle Ben. You're not really old. You're just cantankerous."

"Now, Ellen Shaw—"

"And it's because you sent Hal away to college and it makes you mad to think he learned how to use his own mind instead of taking your word on everything."

But before he could answer, she said, "And now Mr. Roberts and Mr. MacDowell and the rest want to run their stock into South Valley and Hal thinks you're an ornery old cuss not to let them and you think he's a young squirt who isn't dry behind the ears, and you both think you're right and neither one of you is going to budge an inch, so help you Jehosophat!"

They faced each other as she came around before him, standing hands on hips, her head tilted in that little way she had. He saw the teasing smile that touched her lips. Suddenly, and in spite of himself, Ben Thompson laughed.

"Ellen Shaw," he said, trying to make it sound threatening, "you're not too big a girl to spank!"

Her glance changed as footsteps crossed the porch. Bart Ramsey stood in the doorway and as Ben called for the man to come in Ellen remembered her dusting and moved away across the room.

Ramsey was a big man, though but a year or two older than Ben's son, Hal. Though he moved with a lazy deliberateness, there was a solidity in the massive frame of his body; a sure, dominating solidity that was revealed at times.

"Couldn't help hearin' what you had to say out there, boss," he said slowly. "I was in town myself this mornin'. Picked up a couple things I figured you might like to know."

Glancing up at the man, at this foreman he had hired as a result of seeing him fistwhip Big John Guernsey in front of the Longhorn ten years back, Ben's mind tallied an automatic and familiar comparison: Bart Ramsey against his son.

As usual there was no satisfaction in the comparison and he said irritably, "All right, Bart, so you heard. What's biting you?"

Ramsey's glance flickered across the room to Ellen Shaw. Ben turned, seeing that the girl was facing them, having given up the pretense of the dust cloth.

"All right, girl," he said. "Can't you find something to do in the kitchen instead of standing there like a bald-faced calf?"

There was no embarrassment in Ellen Shaw as she came across the room. She faced the two of them, standing in that spread-legged way she had, with the blueness of her eyes sparkling glints in the dim light of the room.

"Go ahead, Bart!" she said firmly. "Tell him what you've got to say. Start your trouble! You're both looking for it, anyway! Like pa always used to say—if you're looking for trouble, you'll find it. And if you don't, you'll make it anyway!"

"Now, Miss Ellen, that ain't rightly so." Ramsey's grin was sheepish, but there was the flicker of admiration in the darkness of his eyes—a boldness that Ben had noticed before when he had caught Bart looking at Ellen Shaw.

Though in the past it had gratified Ben to see that the girl had held herself aloof from any possible advances on his foreman's part, he felt a certain irritation with her now.

"All right, girl," he said again. "Go along. We'll attend to the affairs of Diamond without your help for now!"

When she had gone Ben squinted up at Bart. The foreman's grin slowly faded.

"Seems our friends Roberts and MacDowell are startin' to take things serious, boss," he said. "Hear they hired two, three gunslick boys and figger to move into South Valley, regardless."

Ben Thompson's anger came back with a rush. He cursed, striding suddenly about the room. Upon hearing the rest of Ramsey's story he faced his foreman directly, giving his orders and turning outside and into the saddle once more.

A LATE moon was rising when Ben Thompson drew up near the head of his own South Valley. Young Hal, shifting uncomfortably in the saddle, reined up at his side. Coming on behind, Bart Ramsey was silent, his mount snorting softly as it pawed the damp earth.

Immediately below, the land fell away to the east, dotted weirdly with the looming shadows of piñon and scrub oak and giving away beyond to the rolling, rich grasslands so highly prized by Ben. Though the rancher searched the moon-drenched terrain for long moments in an effort to discover signs of human movement, he shook his head finally, avoiding Hal's glance as he turned to Bart Ramsey.

"Ain't like you to spook on a thing like this, Bart," he said. "But it looks to me like you got your wires crossed this time."

Though he would not have admitted it himself, there was relief in Ben that his foreman might have been wrong for once. It was his difference with Hal, with his own son, and the fact that young Hal had taken it into his head to side with the enemies of Diamond that was for the first time in Ben's life arousing a sense of caution, of hesitation, within him.

Had he been sure of Hal, knowing that his boy was working for the best interests of Diamond, Ben Thompson would have carried his fight directly to Roberts and MacDowell. But remembering his son's reluctance to join him tonight—and remembering too the look of suspicion the boy had darted at Ramsey when he had joined them—Ben felt himself hoping that Bart Ramsey had been wrong about Roberts and the rest.

Ramsey stirred in the saddle, murmuring his advice to wait. And as he waited, continuing to search the moonlit valley below, Ben Thompson felt a deep, unbidden feeling of regret building up within him.

Why had Hal taken the side of his father's enemies? What had he, Ben Thompson, done to deserve such treatment at the hands of his own son? Schooling. For a moment Martha's memory flicked upon the backdrop of his mind. Well, he had given the boy his schooling, hadn't he, just as she had wished? Yes. Four years at Denver. And, by thunder, what good had come of it?

But deeper in Ben's mind even than the memories of his wife and her plans for their son, there was the movement of regret—regret that at this time of life he had lost the respect of his son.

Diamond. Of course there was Diamond. Hadn't he spent his life building the ranch? But Ben Thompson was no man to be blinded by ambition or greed. Material possessions meant much in life, but what did it profit a man to gain wealth, if he lost his own son?

HE HAD glanced at young Hal and was turning words, useless words, in his mind when Bart Ramsey moved up, grunting softly and nodding toward the valley floor below. Squinting against the silvery half-light of the moon, Ben made out the humped movements of stock, seeing abruptly that a small herd had bunched and was slowly moving toward the gap to the south. He made out the shapes of two riders near the flanks of the herd as he spoke.

"All right," he said. "I guess this makes it plain enough, even for a college boy! Come on, son, we got business with some friends of yours!"

Though they dropped down the slope silently enough, and the thick, rich grass of the valley floor muffled their approach, Ben rode entirely around the bunched grouping of stock without catching sight of the riders they had seen from the heights. He rode down as far as the gap itself, cutting a wide swath against the slope before circling back to join Hal and Ramsey near the herd. Anger had built slowly within him during this half hour and as he struck a match and read the Diamond brand on the flank of the nearest animal he cursed abruptly and turned to Hal.

"This is how your friends want South Valley! They want it, all right! But they want the stock that's on it first!" Ben watched his son shake his head.

"They're not rustlers, dad. I think you know it as well as I do."

"Not rustlers?" Ben's anger flared anew. "Not rustlers, eh? Then what the hell you call this little play tonight? You heard Bart say they hired a couple of boys! You saw

these rannies bunching Diamond stock and heading it for the gap!"

"I didn't say these men we saw tonight weren't rustlers." There was a note of infinite patience in the younger man's voice that served only to further infuriate Ben. "I said that Mr. Roberts and Mr. MacDowell weren't rustlers. There's a difference, dad—even if you're so hardheaded you don't want to see it."

"Hardheaded?" Ben stammered in fury. "By thunder, boy—"

Bart Ramsey shifted in saddle, his laughter coming softly. "Maybe," he said, "maybe Hal means I was lyin' about them nesters hirin' on these gunslicks?"

The sudden silence that followed brought Ben up abruptly. What was this between these two?

He watched Hal shake his head and heard him say, "Maybe that's right, Bart. Maybe that's exactly what I mean."

"Here now, here now!" Ben's horse shifted nervously as its rider stiffened abruptly. "We'll have none of this—"

"You may as well hear what I've got to say, dad," Hal cut in. "It's got to come sooner or later, I guess." Ben heard Ramsey's soft chuckle, recognizing again the suggestion of danger it held as Hal continued.

"Whether you like it or not, I know for a fact that none of the men along the bottoms have hired any riders—gunmen or otherwise. I'll admit that we saw at least two men trying to rustle Diamond stock tonight. But I'll say this—I don't think these two men were on their own, either. They acted too cagey, for one thing—as though maybe they knew they were being watched and had the whole play planned just as it happened. I think they wanted you to think they were working for Mr. Roberts and Mr. MacDowell. Or at least I think the man who hired them did!"

Ben was groping in his mind, trying to digest his son's words when Bart Ramsey spoke.

"Sonny, you've been achin' for a good fight ever since you come home! One of these days bein' Ben's son ain't gonna be enough!"

"Here now!" Ben came abruptly to life. "By thunder, that'll be enough of this, understand? I don't know what you're tryin' to say, son! But it ain't making sense, far as I can see! If you want to have a go at it with Bart you're welcome to it—stripped to the waist and standing in the yard in front of the men! But as far as this other thing's concerned, I'm still running Diamond and what I say still goes! And what I say is that Roberts and the rest need a damn good lesson."

"Dad." The very quietness of the word gave Ben Thompson pause. Hal said, "Nobody's arguing about you running Diamond, but as far as I'm concerned you'll have to do it alone. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, dad. That's the way it is."

Ben realized that his son had actually reined around, that he was leaving Diamond now, this minute, before he found voice to speak.

"Hal." There was no thought of pride now, nor of respect. Hal was his only son. "Hal, boy—for your mother's sake—"

The younger man stopped, reining half about. He made a tall, strong shape in the saddle, his face dark in the moon-shadow beneath the brim of his hat.

"Yes, dad. For her sake," he said. He turned then and rode off, heading south through the gap that opened beyond.

There was no sleep that night, nor all of the next day for Ben. He was silent through breakfast, neither responding to Ellen's gay though somewhat puzzled ministrations, nor giving Ramsey more than a brief, uncaring answer when the foreman asked for orders. He swung to saddle and spent the day roaming the far-flung reaches of Diamond, brooding sightlessly as he stared out over the rolling dominions of his land. It was well after dark when he returned to the ranch and he had turned into the yard before he recognized any of the group who sat mounted before the house.

In the outthrown light from window and door Ben recognized four of his own men at the same moment he saw his son, Hal, and the round-shouldered, elderly shape of Lige Roberts. Bart Ramsey turned on the steps and Ellen, her voice filled with anxiety and relief, called out from the porch as Ben reined up.

"Uncle Ben!" She fled down past the foreman, throwing herself into Ben's arms as he stepped down. "Bart! Bart and the rest! They've gone mad, Uncle Ben! Bart says he caught Hal riding with Mr. Roberts and some of the others from the flats! He said they were rustling Diamond stock."

Ben soothed the girl as he met Ramsey's glance from the step. In this moment he seemed to sense the strength, the sheer dominating force that lay in this man who had been his own foreman for nearly ten years.

"That's right, boss!" Bart came down from the step. "Me and the boys figured to have another look-see at South Valley about dark tonight. Caught 'em red-handed, runnin' off over a hundred head. Must have been six or eight, far's we could see. Think we winged one. You can see who we brought in."

Ben forced himself to turn his head, to meet the gaze of his son. Hal, still mounted, looked down at his father with a steady regard that said nothing.

His voice said simply, "You won't believe it, dad, but Bart's your man. Bart's been in back of the whole thing right from the start."

"Bart?" Ben stepped forward, suddenly releasing the girl. Outrage boiled up inside him then. "Bart's behind the whole thing? Why, you sniveling pup! Bart Ramsey has ramrodded Diamond since you were a kid in knee pants!"

For long seconds silence settled upon the yard. Ben fought with the rage that was in him, hearing the sobbing of Ellen's voice as she murmured his name in protest. From the corner of his glance he caught Ramsey's smile, feeling this too as an added irritation within.

"If you won't listen, dad, I guess that's it."

"Oh, please, Uncle Ben! Please!" Ellen begged.

Futility smote without warning in Ben Thompson's mind. Rage, boiling a moment before, died as though it had never been. He felt weak abruptly. He merely nodded at Hal, neither trusting himself to speak, nor having words to use had he wished.

IT WAS nearing dawn when Ben Thompson turned to his son and nodded toward the small shanty that barely could be seen in the tiny mountain meadow below. The slopes about the meadow were heavily timbered and a rising mist completely obscured the far trees in the chill, early light. The cabin itself stood less than a hundred yards from the group on the rise.

"This your shanty, son?" There was neither spirit nor warmth in Ben's voice now. He had heard Hal out and had agreed to accompany him to this spot on the high benchlands above Diamond.

Before answering, Hal turned his head and looked at Bart Ramsey. Ellen, Lige Roberts and the four Diamond riders were sitting beyond. Hal's eyes came back.

"This is it, dad," he said softly. "I know you haven't believed what I said. But I want you to remember that, no matter what happens, I started the whole thing last night. I talked Lige, here, and several of the men from the flats into the idea of catching those rustlers we saw the other night. I figured if we could catch them we could bring them to you and you could make them talk—tell you who had hired them to rustle your beef. And we would have, too! We caught them red-handed! Three of them, bunching Diamond stock about dark!"

The younger man seemed to catch himself, stopping abruptly as though at the memory of the near success he'd had. Ben stirred in the saddle. He wanted to believe the boy. More than anything else he wanted to believe.

"I'm telling you, dad—" Hal's eyes were direct—"Bart let those rustlers go purposely when he and the others cut down from the slope! Those were Bart's men, hired by him to stir up trouble that you would blame on Roberts and MacDowell! I say they were Bart's men and they still are and they're in that cabin right now!"

"Sonny!" Bart Ramsey moved up. "I guess you know you're goin' to pay for this night's work, boss's son or no!"

"Shut up, Bart!" There was abrupt irritation in Ben.

Hal said, "If I'm wrong, Bart has nothing to lose. All he has to do is ride down halfway to the shack and call the men out. If they're not his men we'll cover him. If they are—if they answer his call and come out, knowing who he is—"

Ben nodded as the boy's words faded off. His gaze swung around and touched his foreman's face. Bart Ramsey was looking at Hal and in this instant Ben felt an actual shock of surprise at the hatred and sheer, killing lust he saw there.

For the first time in the ten years since he had hired the man Ben felt as though his foreman's full character lay revealed before him. He thought then of the way Ramsey had looked at Ellen. He realized suddenly

what the man might have stood to gain should Hal be banished, or possibly hanged. The Diamond and Ellen. In this moment Ben Thompson stood in positive awe of his own ignorance through the years.

He said, "You heard him, Bart. Halfway to the cabin and call out." When the man's eyes came around he saw that their hatred had not dimmed, and added, "Just halfway, Bart. I'd hate to have to shoot my own foreman in the back!"

Bart Ramsey nodded slowly. He looked once more at Hal. "Sonny," he said. "This is going to cost!" He turned then and walked his horse slowly down the slope toward the meadow.

Ben had turned to the other riders, sending them out around the flanks, warned Ellen back into the covering timber and had noticed that Hal and Lige Roberts had spread out, when suddenly Bart Ramsey fired, yelling as he spurred at a run for the cabin.

The shot slammed its sudden explosion against the quiet air. Ben's horse reared beneath him as he clawed his carbine from its boot. He came down in time to hear the second shot, seeing Ramsey's mount nose into the grass before the shack, spilling the foreman within yards of the door.

Ramsey yelled again, clambering to his feet. He turned and snapped a shot up the slope. The door opened and he stepped quickly inside. A volley of three shots broke from the cabin windows. Lige Roberts cried out and went down.

He dismounted stiffly, levering a cartridge into the chamber before starting down the slope. A gun blasted from a window and he felt the nearness of its passage by his cheek.

"Dad! Dad, you damned fool! Get back!"

Ben Thompson came to a stop. He faced the cabin and called.

"Bart!" The firing dropped off. "Bart! It's you and me, boy! The rest can go."

Ben waited. He heard the shuffle of boots inside, heard a man curse. He held the carbine dangling loosely in one hand, one finger on the trigger.

"Dad!" Hal called. "Dad!"

"I gave my word, boy! Keep the men back!" Ben did not turn as he called to Hal. He said, "It's just Bart and me! If he gets past me he goes free."

The door opened then. Bart Ramsey, the whiteness of his smile showing across the yards, stepped clear. He was a wide shape; a tall, big, strong man. Ben remembered the years when he would have traded Bart Ramsey for his son.

"Not you, boss!" Bart hardly raised his voice. "You ain't gonna get old!"

His right knee bent then. Ben saw it. More than that, he remembered that knee and how it bent. Who had taught the boy to shoot, to try to correct that little fault?

The carbine came up and leveled and blasted in the same second that Bart's gun roared. Solid shock exploded inside Ben Thompson's body.

He staggered and fell, knowing he was falling and yet holding no sense of direction, nor being able to break his fall. He had missed! He had missed! The words cried out in the depth of darkness behind his eyes.

Miraculously, sight came clear. Trees. Timber. No. Grass. Blades of grass before his eyes. He raised his head, seeing Bart Ramsey suddenly beyond. He tried to grope for the carbine, but there was no sensation in hand or arm.

Bart was standing before the cabin. As Ben watched the man stepped forward. He took two steps, three, coming directly up the slope. Until now Ben had not noticed that the man had dropped his gun. The foreman of Diamond wavered upon his feet. His eyes were blank and his mouth had fallen slack.

He fell then, face forward upon the wet grass of the meadow.

SUN WARMED the blanket covering Ben Thompson's knees. Sitting on the porch at Diamond, he winked at Hal in the saddle beyond, speaking gruffly to the girl who hovered yet at his side.

"Go along, now girl! A honeymoon don't wait forever! And if you keep that man you're marrying around here much longer he's liable to talk me into giving away a heck of a lot more than one little valley to them two-bit farmer friends of his! Go on, now! Scat, the two of you! And mind you take a full month, understand? Man don't have but one honeymoon, whether a woman thinks different or not!"

Hal waved as the pair reined away.

Ben watched his son and daughter ride out. She was a sweet little lass. But the tall, lean shape of the man held his eye.

He's me, he thought. *But not too much of me, Martha. Not too much at that.*

In the days when you had to be tough just to live, Jack Slade made mere outlaws tremble—for he was a little less than human, a little more than ornery—and even on the gallows—

DEAD WRONG

By SKIPPY ADELMAN

AMONG the more distasteful characters of the Old West was one Jack Slade, a supervisor for the Overland Stage Company. A bully and a sadist, Slade was shunned by the whole community, including the outlaw element. He killed not for profit but for the sheer joy of killing. For a watch fob he wore a human ear, the former property of Jules Beni, Founder of Julesburg, Colorado, whom Slade had brutally murdered. Slade took great pride in the grisly trophy. It was his dearest possession, and it always made him the center of attention in whatever barroom he happened to be at the moment.

Slade haunted barrooms. He delighted in making friends with some innocent newcomer and then subtly turning the pleasant conversation into a bitter quarrel. Not infrequently the quarrel ended in death for the stranger.

There was no law in Colorado at that time, so the local citizens banded together as vigilantes and arrested Slade. He was tried and sentenced to be hanged. The night before his execution, Slade was visited by his beautiful wife, Virginia. She had two pistols concealed on her, and the two of them shot their way out of prison.

Slade and his wife fled to Montana. Unfortunately, he negleced to change his character along with his address. In a little while his bullying gained him the status of a public nuisance and as he grew worse he came to be regarded as a mad dog. Once again Slade's behavior forced his neighbors to form a vigilante committee. Slade was quickly tried and again sentenced to be hanged. The sentence was to be carried out immediately.

The only redeeming aspect of Slade's life was the devotion he and his wife seemed to bear for each other. As he stood with a noose around his neck he exclaimed, "My dear wife! Must I die? My dear wife." Learning of his arrest, Slade's wife gathered together a pair of pistols, mounted her horse and sped for the scene of her husband's execution. She said later that she had no hope of rescuing him as she did in Colorado but that she had hoped to shoot her husband to spare him the shame of being strangled to death.

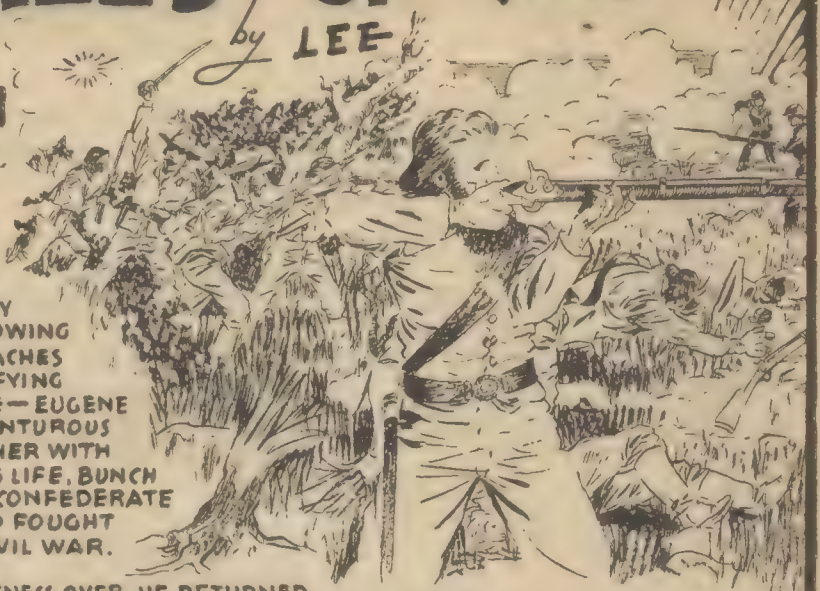
She arrived too late.

Virginia Slade was given her husband's body, but winter was at hand and the ground was too cold to be excavated. She had a tin coffin built and filled it with alcohol, in which she placed her husband's body. All winter she kept this coffin in her dreary little cabin, lifting its lid and examining her dead husband's features several times a day.

TALES of the

by LEE

BADMAN BUNCH



ONE OF THE OLD WEST'S PRETTIEST BADMEN WAS A STRAPPING SIX-FOOTER WITH WAVY AUBURN HAIR, FLOWING BEARD AND MUSTACHES AND THE UNTERRIFYING NAME OF EUGENE—EUGENE BUNCH. AN ADVENTUROUS GAMBLER, WHETHER WITH HIS MONEY OR HIS LIFE, BUNCH ENLISTED IN THE CONFEDERATE ARMY AT 20 AND FOUGHT THROUGH THE CIVIL WAR.

THAT UNPLEASANTNESS OVER, HE RETURNED TO HIS NATIVE LOUISIANA, MARRIED A WEALTHY LOCAL BEAUTY AND TAUGHT SCHOOL. BUT LIFE PROVED TOO TAME AND HE MOVED TO TEXAS. THERE, WITH THE HELP OF HIS WIFE'S MONEY, HE WENT INTO POLITICS AND WAS ELECTED COUNTY CLERK.

WHEN HIS WIFE'S MONEY RAN OUT, BUNCH VAMOOSED WITH THE COUNTY FUNDS AND CUT A WIDE SWATH THROUGH THE GAMBLING PALACES OF DALLAS. HIS EMBEZZLED DOLLARS DIDN'T LAST LONG AND HE THREW IN WITH A GANG OF TRAIN ROBBERS—AT LEAST, IT WAS NOTICED THAT WHENEVER HE WENT BROKE, HE DISAPPEARED, THERE WAS A TRAIN ROBBERY AND HE REAPPEARED WELL HEELED

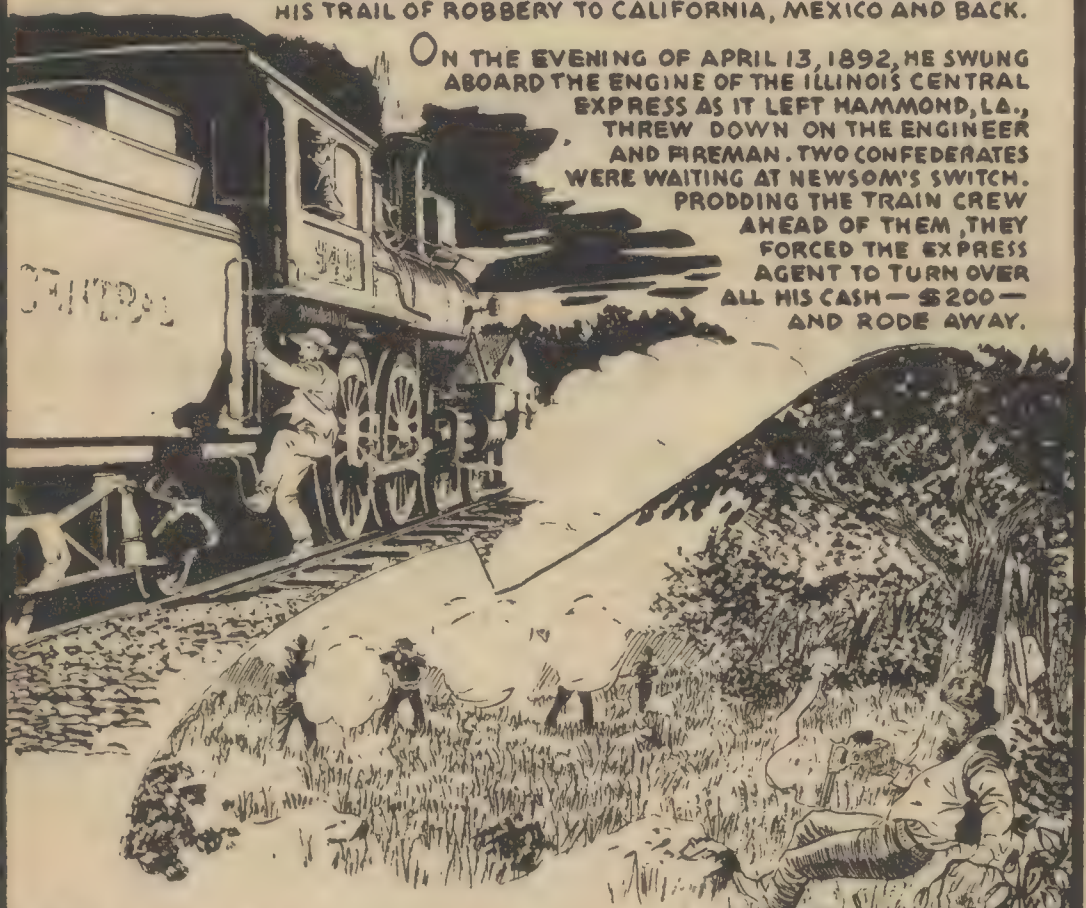
DURING ONE OF THESE SPORADIC VANISHINGS, A BANK WAS HELD UP AT CISCO. A DEPUTY SHERIFF CAME TO QUESTION BUNCH AT HIS FAVORITE HANGOUT, BUT THE BADMAN GOT THE DROP ON HIM AND ESCAPED. WITH THE HEAT ON, HE RETURNED TO LOUISIANA TO HIDE OUT FOR AWHILE.

— OLD WEST

BUT THE NEW ORLEANS & NORTHEASTERN'S CRACK EXPRESS PROVED TOO TEMPTING TO PASS UP. BOARDING IT ONE NIGHT IN OCTOBER, 1888, HE SAT QUIETLY IN THE SMOKER UNTIL THEY PASSED PEARL RIVER. THEN HE STEPPED OUT ON THE PLATFORM, ADJUSTED A MASK OVER HIS FACE, AND SHOULDERED INTO THE EXPRESS CAR. AT GUNPOINT HE FORCED THE AGENT TO STUFF SOME $25,000 INTO CANVAS SACKS, YANKED THE EMERGENCY CORD, LEAPED OFF AND DISAPPEARED IN THE WOODS.

BUNCH LIT OUT WEST AGAIN, WITH EXPRESS COMPANY DETECTIVES FOLLOWING HIS TRAIL OF ROBBERY TO CALIFORNIA, MEXICO AND BACK.

ON THE EVENING OF APRIL 13, 1892, HE SWUNG ABOARD THE ENGINE OF THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL EXPRESS AS IT LEFT HAMMOND, LA., THREW DOWN ON THE ENGINEER AND FIREMAN. TWO CONFEDERATES WERE WAITING AT NEWSOM'S SWITCH. PRODDING THE TRAIN CREW AHEAD OF THEM, THEY FORCED THE EXPRESS AGENT TO TURN OVER ALL HIS CASH — $200 — AND RODE AWAY.



FOR FOUR MONTHS BUNCH ELUDED PURSUIT, THEN A DETECTIVE WITH A POSSE CORNERED HIM IN A CLUMP OF WOODS. BUNCH CAME OUT SHOOTING AND A BLAST OF GUNFIRE QUICKLY PUT AN END TO THE CAREER OF THE HANDSOME BADMAN WHO THOUGHT HIS WILD WEST TECHNIQUE WOULD WORK IN LOUISIANA.

75 107

Cummer went after Beau, that mad light in his eyes. . . .

TRIGGER TIME

By DAVID CREWE

BEAU BANGOR got up early and stuck his head out the bunkhouse door to see what it was like, because he had big plans afoot. It was a beautiful day—a beautiful day to roam. "And that's what I'm going to do," he told himself, adding, with a scowl, because he expected the attempt to be made, "Nobody's going to stop me. I'm going off to see the world. Texas, anyway."

He repeated the statement later to Jenny Linstrom when he was eating his breakfast, and Jenny didn't like what she heard. "You can't leave me here alone with pop gone," she told him. "It—it's too risky for me." She had fair hair and nice, honest blue eyes, and there was pride in the way she held herself, like some wild animal standing on a high place.

That was how it struck Beau anyway. He wondered if her father had considered it any risk leaving the two of them here alone so long, and, if he hadn't, what on earth he had on his mind anyway. Aloud, he said, "There's no risk. You know that as well as I do, and it's the only way I can get away from here. Every time I start talkin' about it, your pop augurs me out of it."

For living or dying, this was Beau Bangor's town —a town that would let him do anything—except ride out alive!

"Pop owes you three months' pay. What're you going to do about that?"

"I'll see him in town when he gets back from Daley's Junction and get it off'n him. I got a deal on, anyway, with a horse trader who's in town. He'll take Skunky off my hands for fifty dollars to boot, and I'll have me a horse—a real animal."

"I don't know why you want to go. Don't you like it here?"

Beau almost got a lump in his throat at this point, but he choked it down with his food and said a man owed it to himself to look around and see things.

"I don't see why," she said, small lines of puzzlement creasing her forehead. "It's the same all over."

"Nobody can tell me that," Beau scoffed.

"It's still the same, Beau," she insisted. "Big or small, it's still cows you got to take care of."

"Oh, now, come off," he reproved her. "Don't you start in on me." From habit learned here at this table, he closed his eyes, muttered something in Swedish that meant "Thanks for good food," and got up.

She went outside with him and watched him saddle his horse. He glowered a little because she was making it hard for him. There was reproof in her silence, as if he ought to take it for granted he belonged here, but he wasn't going to let her budge him. No, sir.

"Won't you kiss me?" she asked finally in a low whisper.

It jolted him to his toes. Whatever he might have thought during these past few days—and nights—when they had been here alone together, it hadn't occurred to him that she might find her young eagerness hard to quell as well as he. She wanted him to see it before he went away and had broken through her shy reserve to show him.

He took a long, frowning look at her and then said, "Why—why, sure, Jenny."

He did it, and held her closer and closer, keeping his lips to hers. Then, suddenly, he stood back and said in a confused whisper, "I—I reckon I better go."

"Don't forget me, Beau," she said gravely.

"I sure won't," he told her.

All the way to town he thought of this parting, and it kept getting in the way whenever he tried to see all those far places he was going to. "It's always hard to say good-by," he told himself, shaking his head. "To anybody. And she's a nice girl."

The name of the town where he expected to meet Sven Linstrom and get his long overdue pay was Jasmineville. There had been a time when it was called something quite different, but folks had gotten touchy and changed it.

He left his horse at the blacksmith shop to be shod, giving Pone Cummer, the blacksmith, careful instructions. The animal had a small limp and Beau was worried that the horse trader might detect it and back out of the deal. Shod the right way, it didn't show the flaw. Cummer, a square-built man of huge muscle and violent temper, had set up his shop less than a year ago. He was known to take advice grudgingly, and now he showed the flail of his temper against it, but Beau had his say regardless.

When he was through, he noticed the stranger. The man had been standing behind the forge, but whether he had kept out of sight intentionally or not, Beau couldn't say. He had a swarthy complexion, and his eyes were smoky with arrogance. His gun holster was strapped to his leg so it wouldn't foul when he wanted his weapon in a hurry. Beau had a feeling he had interrupted some talk between Cummer and the stranger, but he couldn't be sure.

As soon as their eyes met, the stranger came out of the clutter behind the forge, and Beau said, "Howdy."

THE man didn't answer, and Beau felt his dander go up at the slight. The salty looking hombre turned back to Cummer until, suddenly, their glances met, and some silent warning or understanding passed between them. Then the stranger turned on Beau and gave him a flat-lipped grin. "I been tryin' to get this dummy to tell me how to get to Daley's Junction," he stated. "Now tell me, is there any harm in that?"

"I don't reckon," Beau answered, a little ruefully.

"Well, why don't he speak up an' say his piece?"

"I'll show you," Beau offered, stepping outside so he could draw it out in the dirt with a stick.

The stranger, however, didn't put his mind on Beau's work, and when it was finished he seemed in no hurry to go. His horse stood in front of the saloon up the street and they walked that way together.

"This is hell of a place," the stranger remarked. "I don't see how you take it."

Beau bristled, forgetting how often he had said the same thing. "What's wrong with it?"

With a faint leer the stranger suddenly grabbed his gun, and fanned the hammer until the weapon was empty. "You see what I mean?" he remarked with cool effrontery. "Never hit a thing."

"I'd say that was good," Beau told him.

"What a town!" the stranger repeated.

"Well, dammit," Beau exploded, "you can slope outa here any time you please!"

"Don't give me any lip," the other warned.

The uproar raised some small curiosity up and down the street, but it was gone almost as soon as the sound hid its last small mutter in the far distance. The swaggering stranger went into the saloon, but Beau stayed outside on the gallery. "A man shouldn't come to a strange town and run it down," he muttered. "Who does he think he is, anyway?"

An answer came from inside the saloon. "I'm the Moquaw Kid." It was the stranger's voice, full of blurt and bluster, telling Sly Dix, who ran the place, how to treat his customers. "Don't try any of those tricks on me. Take that slop and throw it down the sink. Trot out some whiskey a man can drink."

There was a sudden clatter of glassware, followed by Sly's mild protest, then an interval of silence. Beau got up and went inside, getting angrier by the minute. Some loyalty to this town and to the people in it, deep-rooted in spite of himself, made it his affair as much as anyone's.

"If you can't behave yourself in here, Mister," he snapped, "get out!"

Sly's face went white with concern. "Now, Beau," he said. "Now, now—"

For some reason the Moquaw Kid didn't fly off the handle. A blind man could see what he was, and Beau braced himself for the worst, but it didn't come. The Moquaw Kid was on the edge of it, tense from head to foot, a catlike glare in his eyes, but he pushed it away from him and let his body ease up, lifting his knees like a horse with spring-halt, wriggling his shoulders until the tight compulsion went out of them.

"Why don't the son dish up some decent whiskey?" he muttered. "That's all I asked for."

Beau didn't answer, and he didn't delude himself that it was his own brash bluster that had cooled off the Moquaw Kid. It was something the man had inside himself that had done it, something that showed he was more than blurt and bluster, and made him loom a little larger, a little more dangerous than he had before.

"Why ain't you workin', Beau?" Sly asked, blinking the last of the whiskey sting out of his eyes.

"I quit the Linstroms, Sly," Beau answered. "I'm goin' to look around and see some country."

"Aw!" Sly muttered, regretfully.

"I've been thinking about it for some time. As soon as Sven gets back from Daley's Junction, I'll be on my way."

"I hear he made a good deal over there for his beef."

Beau nodded. "The best he's done in years. He'll have close to five thousand dollar even after he pays me off. That's what I'm waitin' for now—my wages."

"What about Jenny?"

"What about her?"

"Well—uh—nothin', I guess." Sly paused a moment, then added suddenly, "But Sven won't get back today."

"He told me so," Beau insisted. "And if he says today, today it is. I'll say that much for him."

Sly gave him a quick warning look and canted his head toward the Moquaw Kid. "He won't be back today," he repeated. "It'll be a couple days anyway. Besides, he'll bank that cash in Daley's Junction anyway, won't he?"

"Well," Beau said, catching on to what Sly was trying to do, but realizing, too, that he had let the cat too far out of the bag to get it back in, "I reckon so."

Their talk died down and the Moquaw Kid got up and went outside. Sly Dix let out a sigh of relief. "I ought to keep a shotgun handy," he remarked, "but I don't reckon I'd have the nerve to use it if it came to a pinch. I never seen such an ornery buzzard as that before. I thought you were goin' to get plugged, Beau."

"I did too," Beau agreed.

"You shouldn't've butted in."

"I couldn't help myself. He rubbed me the wrong way."

"You reckon he heard our talk about Sven?"

"I reckon he did," Beau admitted, glum-

ly. "He told me he was going to Daley's Junction, and if he meets up with Sven on the way, there'll be hell to pay. Sven won't bank in Daley's Junction, that's sure."

"I know it," Sly agreed.

"I better keep an eye on him, and if he pulls out I'll trail along."

"Don't get into trouble, Beau."

Beau shook his head and went outside. The Moquaw Kid had crossed the street and was heading for the eating house, leaving his horse at the hitchrack in front of Sly's place. Beau took a walk to the edge of town to see if Sven Linstrom was anywhere in sight, but there was nothing that moved in that direction, so far as he could see.

On the way back he met the horse trader, who gave him a sly grin and said, "You didn't need to get your horse shod. I knew he was lame."

Beau grinned ruefully. "I thought I was foxin' you," he muttered.

"No," the horse trader said indulgently.

"You ain't foxin' me, are you?"

"No," the horse trader said to that, too. He oozed honesty, but Beau suddenly had his doubts. Skunky was a good horse, except for that limp, and the capers he cut because of his tender feet, when he was being shod. Otherwise, he was about what Beau liked; steady, honest, a little slow, perhaps, not half as bad as he had always made out; something like this town he was leaving behind.

"Dammit," he muttered, heading for the blacksmith shop, "you'd think I hated to leave this place. I'm not that crazy. Still—" He clamped his lips together, shutting out the other side of the argument

THE Moquaw Kid was still eating, the only customer in the place. He probably aimed to get an early start for Daley's Junction. Worry about Sven Linstrom started to gnaw at Beau again. He cut diagonally across the street to Cummer's. From a distance, he noticed his horse, as usual, was throwing a fit about being shod, and Cummer, bad-tempered at best, was beginning to rave. Beau heard him cussing and hurried to help. The horse wasn't mean, but its sore feet gave it the fidgets. It reared suddenly, just as Beau came in the door, knocking its head against the ceiling. Cummer let out a roar, and when the animal came down on all fours again, the blacksmith swung his hammer.

Beau lunged and grabbed his arm, but the blow struck the horse in the head and dropped him like a stone. Cummer was in a raging fury. He had a neck as thick as his skull, and the cords along the sides stood out like harness hames. He swung the hammer again, this time at Beau, a solid, flashing core of death that would have brained Beau if it had struck a solid blow. But he got out from under and it slid down his arm.

"Dammit, man!" he roared. "Stop it!"

Cummer probably never heard him. He looked possessed. There had always been talk around that he was a pardoned convict, and had hammered a man to death in a fit of temper many years ago. Cummer had never explained himself, and no one had bothered to find out the truth so long as he behaved himself. But he had jumped off the end of his short temper now and he meant to kill Beau if he could manage it.

The sour reek of burned hoof and sweat simmered around him; his leather apron hampered him and he tore it off with his free hand. The mad light stayed in his eyes and Beau backed off, step by step, until he tuoched the wall and couldn't go any further. "Get back, Cummer," he warned. "Get away from me. I got a gun."

He got it out of the holster, but Cummer struck again and sent the weapon flying. Beau's hand went numb to the elbow, but with Cummer off balance for a second, he slid out of the corner and got into the open.

Cummer went after him with a snarl in his throat, his snaggy teeth snapping. Once again, Beau dodged the hammer and drove his good fist solidly to the side of Cummer's head. The blacksmith tripped over the clutter on the floor and went down. Beau kicked the hammer out of his hand and jumped him from behind, straddling his wide frame and holding him down by the neck. Feeling came back to his numb arm and he pounded Cummer's head, rocking it from side to side. Cummer heaved up like a bucking horse and threw him, but Beau twisted over and kicked him in the face. Cummer reeled back, finally turning a somersault over the fallen horse and landing on the other side. Beau followed him around. Cummer was dazed, and worked his jaw as if trying to get it back into place. Another weird snarl came out of his throat. Painfully he got off his knees, bracing himself against the horse. Beau tried to hit him again, but missed. His

glance shifted and he saw the Moquaw Kid standing in the doorway.

"Kill him, Kid!" Cummer yelled suddenly. "Kill the stinkin' buzzard!"

"What's the rip here, anyway?" the Moquaw Kid drawled.

"Kill him, Kid!" Cummer shrilled again.

"You gone nuts?" the Moquaw Kid demanded.

"He's Linstrom's hired hand. Ain't that enough? He heard our war talk!"

"Shut up!" the Moquaw Kid snapped. The words spilled out like stones, and he strode past Beau straight at Cummer.

Cummer pointed at Beau, gathering more words, but before he could make a sound, the Moquaw Kid lifted his weapon and dropped Cummer to the floor in a soundless heap with one blow.

That was the end of it. The Moquaw Kid holstered his weapon with an angry shove, and put his fists on his hips. Beau recovered his gun and took a look at his horse. The animal wasn't dead, only stunned, and he finally got it on its feet and led it out of the shop. Silently, the Moquaw Kid watched him out of sight.

Beau led his horse to the hitchrack in front of Sly's place, and washed his own face in the water trough across the street. Then he came back and sat down under the wooden awning, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. He hadn't heard what Cummer thought he had, but what he had heard was strange talk all the same. Cummer knew the Moquaw Kid, and it carried some weight that he was Sven Linstrom's hired hand. But why it mattered, Beau couldn't guess. The Moquaw Kid stayed in the shop a long time, still in no hurry to start for Daley's Junction. That much was in Beau's favor, because his horse couldn't have carried him a mile. Sven Linstrom got back while the Moquaw Kid was eating, just at early dark. He had a queer gray look on his face, and fell off his horse at Sly's hitchrack as soon as the animal came to a stop.

He had no cash with him. He had been beaten and robbed in the livery stable in Daley's Junction when he was getting ready to pull out. That had been the previous night. "They cleaned me out," he explained after he got some of Sly's whiskey down his throat. "That son come at me from behind out of a dark stall and hit me over the head with a gunbarrel. My head is cut open clear to the bone. Why're you in town, Beau?"

"I'm pulling out, Sven."

"Oh, no! No."

"I am, Sven."

"You can't do that to me with a broken head. We had that out before, Beau."

"We had it out your way, but this time you aren't going to talk me out of it. I'm leaving."

"I can't pay you, Beau. I got no cash. Ha—that's one good thing out of it anyway."

"Who robbed you?" Beau asked, gloomily.

"And how would I know?"

"Didn't you get a look at him?"

"I don't have eyes in the back of my head."

"Did you tell anybody over there you had that cash?"

"No. I go to the buyer. He say 'Here you are, Sven.' I say 'Thank you.' I put cash in money belt and make to come home. Then—bam!"

"You told everybody around here," Sly put in. "That's what you did do."

"Sure," Sven said gravely. "Why not? Here everybody is my friend."

Sly's whiskey, in spite of what the Moquaw Kid had said about it, made Sven feel better, and Beau took him across the street to the eating house. The Moquaw Kid, going through the rite of picking his teeth, was still there. He looked down the counter at them and grinned flatly. "Don't thank me for buttin' into your fight," he told Beau, with that arrogant way he had. "I enjoyed every bit of it."

"I noticed it was the way you wanted it to go," Beau answered.

"What d'you mean by that? Why would I want it to go any special way?"

"You tell me."

"Don't get too smart, sonny." The Moquaw Kid walked past behind them, touched Beau on the shoulder with one finger, and went out.

SVEN LINSTROM perked up when he got some food inside of him, but the loss of his cattle cash was a hard blow. "Now look, Beau," he began again, "how can I hire anybody else when I have no money."

"How can you hire me?"

"It's different with you, Beau. You belong with us."

"Don't start that again," Beau muttered.

"You got to think of some way to get your cash back, that's all you got to worry about."

"Can I think up the face of a man I have never seen? No, I did my thinking. My cash is gone."

"Maybe someone from here did it. You told everybody what a big deal you were making. I heard you myself in the blacksmith shop the other day."

"And who from here would do such a thing?"

Who indeed, Beau thought, unless—unless it could have been Cummer. Or the Moquaw Kid. His spine began to prickle, but the thread of his thinking soon raveled out. Cummer had been here in town when it happened. And only today the Moquaw Kid had asked his way to Daley's Junction. A hard-riding man on a good horse could make the trip in a night, and the Moquaw Kid's horse certainly had looked hard-ridden.

Sven finally climbed his horse again and headed for home. The Moquaw Kid's horse was still at the tie rail with a feedbag on its nose, and Beau did the same for his own. Skunky looked low in spirit, but Beau dared to hope the blow hadn't done him any real harm. The deal with the horse trader was off, of course. A man wouldn't want to take a horse with a lump on his head.

The Moquaw Kid wasn't in Sly's place and Beau took a prowl around town, but couldn't locate him anywhere. Cummer's shack, in a grove of cottonwoods a stone's throw outside of town, was dark. So was his shop, but Cummer was a man who kept to himself, and he was bound to be at one place or the other.

Beau took another prowl, this time clear out of town, and when he had gone far enough he turned off into the cottonwoods. The shack was a dark blob in the center of the grove, and Beau moved carefully over the uneven ground. His arm ached badly from the hammer blow. His head thumped, and a lump was growing where it had no business to be. When he got in close enough, a thin sliver of light showed from the shack and he heard the low mumble of voices. Cummer and the Moquaw Kid were inside, talking.

Beau couldn't catch all that was said, but some of it was clear and distinct. Cummer had indeed heard Sven Linstrom making his proud talk about the cash he was going to get, and he had set things afoot that had finally cost Sven the whole sum. Cummer and the Moquaw Kid were in the deal together. It was the Moquaw Kid who had slugged Sven in the livery barn in Daley's Junction, and, from his talk, had meant to leave him there for dead. Then he had made a fast ride back to Jasmineville to divide the loot with Pone Cummer.

The Moquaw Kid was put out because Cummer had made him hang around all day, waiting to divide the loot. It puzzled Beau why he had done so, but he found out Cummer had the arrogant outlaw by the nose. "I told you not to come in my shop," Beau heard Cummer say. "You'll wait till I'm good an' ready, and then you'll dance to my tune. Now next time—"

"There won't be no next time, Cummer. I don't like your style."

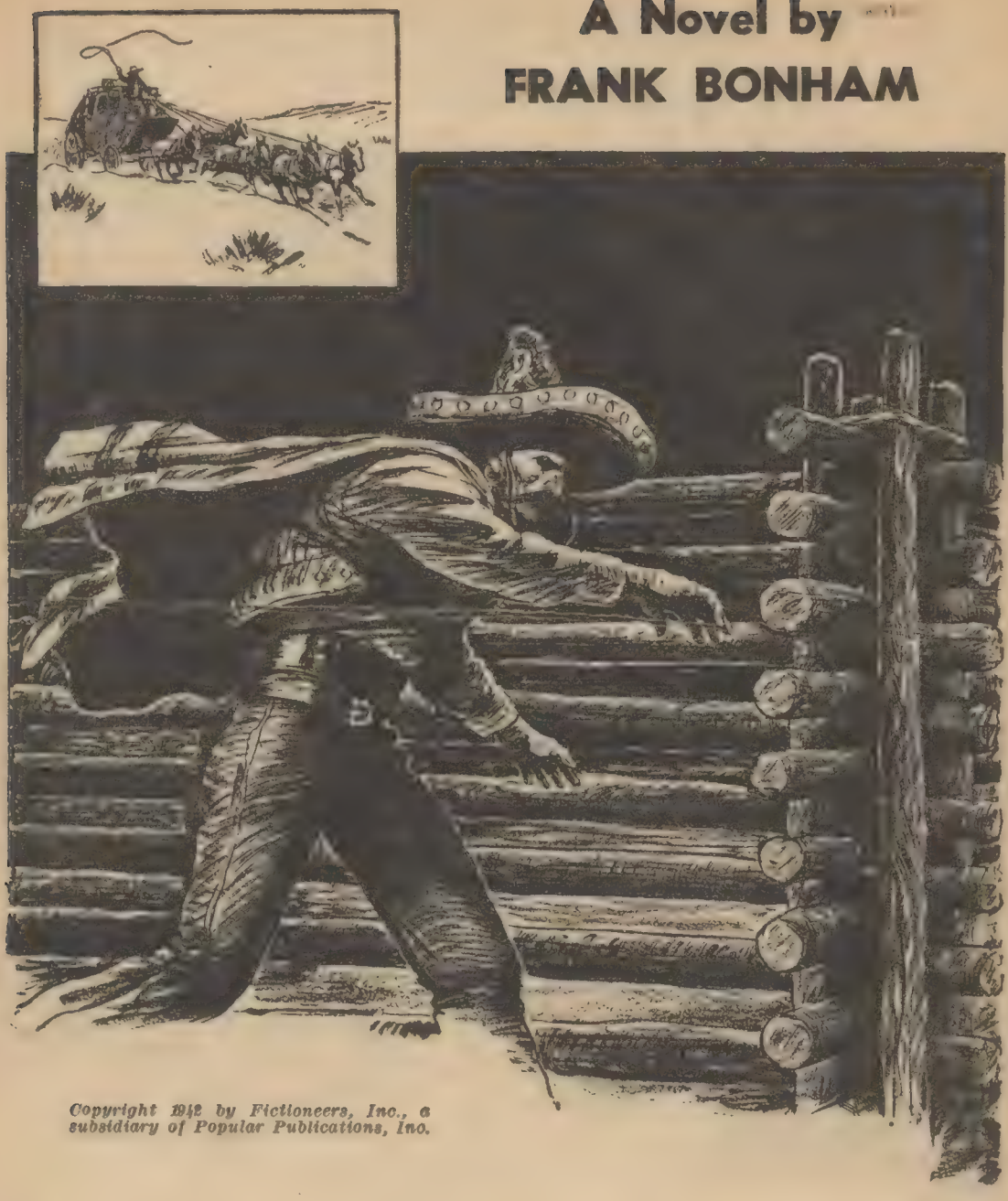
"There'll be a next time if I say so," Cummer snarled. "You busted outa the pen, an' I'm the one who can give the word to put you back. Remember that."

"Don't push it too hard, Cummer," the Moquaw Kid said in a tired voice. "We'll split this loot and I'll slope."

Beau pushed open the door and stepped inside. They were sitting at a rickety table in the middle of the room, Sven's moneybelt and a smoky lantern between them. The Moquaw Kid had his back to the door; Cummer was facing it, and his eyes lifted from the small heap of rumpled greenery that was Sven's cash. A startled word froze on his tongue. His hands slid over the edge of the table like crawling snakes. Then he leaped, and dumped the table into the Moquaw Kid's lap. The lantern tipped and fluffed out. Cummer's gun roared, and lead whistled its dark threat. Beau fired back and went to the floor near the wall. Fingers of gunflame crisscrossed each other and stabbed at the walls. Din and fury threshed back and forth in the tight quarters like a caged animal. Cummer yelped and went down with a hard thud, but his gun still blazed. Beau felt a sting of pain across his back, jumping from shoulder to shoulder, but it let him go. He had an advantage because he was alone. Cummer and the Moquaw Kid didn't know who was who, if they cared. Beau was sure the Moquaw Kid had shot Cummer, whether intentionally or by mistake he couldn't say. Cummer's breath wheezed in and out like a dry pump,

(Continued on page 104)

A Novel by
FRANK BONHAM



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Butcher McCarthy's Boy

"I know your old man. He led us into a pocket in the Mexican line —an' only a dozen came out alive. You're the son of Butcher McCarthy—an' a traitor, just like your dad!"

Flashing, the Mexican's knife slipped through the air with the barest whisper. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Journey for Satan

THE short jacket and linsey-woolsey pants he wore had not been fashioned for a foggy seacoast town, and the chill fingers of the mist touched his flesh damply. But if he shivered, it was from excitement, for he carried a groaning weight on his shoulders—the weight of all Texas, it seemed. The long days of waiting had run out. This moment was for action.

The ship pried through the fog like a ghost, her port lights warm red spheres in the mist. Her hardwood strakes shouldered with a groan against the dock pilings, jarring Bruce where he leaned against a barrel.

From the bridge descended the foghorn voice of the master. Heavy hawsers thudded upon the dock and lines rattled through

blocks; roustabouts appeared from nowhere, and aloft the royals slatted with muffled cannonading.

When the gangplank had been run out, Bruce McCarthy went aboard. He was all nerves and sweating. In his mind he went back and forth over the things he would say, the way he would say them. For any blunder he made, a terrible price might be paid. Texans would be telling again how Bruce's father had blundered once and paid with the lives of nearly an entire company of mounted rifles.

"Butcher McCarthy!" Had it not been for that phrase and the expression on men's faces when they used it, Bruce reckoned he would not be here tonight. But here he was, an eighteen-year-old with a man's job ahead. Moreover, he had nothing by way of encouragement but the recollection of Sam Houston's smile, the weight of Houston's big hand on his shoulder, the way Houston had talked to the army men who balked at entrusting a charge of such urgency to the son of Butcher McCarthy.

"I shouldn't wonder if young McCarthy was the best man in Texas for the job," Houston had said.

Remembering that, Bruce strode almost confidently along the planks to the afterdeck.

The master stood there with a small group of passengers whose baggage was in a heap off to one side. Bruce did not wait to be noticed, but thrust his voice loud and brusquely into the conversation.

"Are you the folks that's going to San Antone?"

A tall man in the blue uniform and the high, shiny black boots of a Texas Dragoon looked down his long nose at Bruce. There was apparently nothing in the demeanor of this long-shanked young fellow, with his high-crowned *jipi* straw hat and thin brown features, to warrant his interrupting his betters.

"Who are you, boy?"

"I'm McCarthy. Mr. Tompkins sent me. I'm to take you as far as Eagle Pass in the mud wagon."

Tompkins operated a freight line between Brownsville and San Antonio. He had been happy enough to have a capable youngster offer to drive the monthly coach to Eagle Pass for nothing, just to get home.

"Young to be handling the post, aren't you?" The dragoon asked the question with an incisive stare that nearly laid bare the guilt in Bruce's eyes.

"Not these days," Bruce said promptly. "All the men folks, mostly, are under arms. Body dasn't cross the river any more. There's sniping already."

A fat man with a young woman on his arm and a girl at her side, his big body clothed in a fine woolen suit with scarlet lapels and cuffs, rapped on the deck nervously with his cane.

"No prospect of any trouble on the trip, I suppose?"

"None that a few gun-handy gents can't turn aside," said Bruce.

He let a decent pause gather before his next remark, for he must be sure that his man heard him distinctly.

"It's getting late, gents, and we've got a long way to go this night."

A lean, dark-faced man with a cloak about his shoulders and a small portmanteau in his grasp made reply quickly, every syllable from his tongue falling into a ready slot in Bruce's mind.

"Are our horses stout?"

"As stout as any in Texas!" In Bruce McCarthy's eyes there was a flash of pride and relief. He sent one brief, sharp glance at the man whom Sam Houston had ordered him to bring safely from Brownsville to the capital.

The man was long and thin as a blade; his eyes were deep-set and as black as two lumps of coal. Beyond that he seemed an ordinary citizen, clad in brown boots and cloak and trousers, and with a mouth that smiled pleasantly.

The wife of the stout man said impatiently, "If there's such a hurry, what are you standing there for? Help the girl with the bags."

Heart fumbling in his excitement, Bruce now gave his attention to the girl who was struggling with the baggage. In the gloom he noticed only that she was quite young, about his age, a well set up girl with blonde hair under a plain gray bonnet. Her manner was restrained, almost meek, and she drew back when Bruce tried to relieve her of the valises.

"No, I—I can carry them!"

She hurried by with her eyes downcast. *Man'd think she'd been caught at the sorghum bucket,* thought Bruce. *But maybe*

that's just the way o' them Eastern gals.

WITH the bags stowed in the boot, Bruce crammed his passengers into the mud wagon, whipped up the horses, and the coach rolled out of Brownsville along the potholed river road, her yellow lamps bobbling in the fog.

His hope had been to make Hogg's Tavern, first stop on their three day journey, by nine o'clock, but rains had turned the wheel tracks into rivers of yellow ooze that made the going slow, so that it was crowding midnight when they pulled into the yard.

Hogg, the tavernkeeper, stood by the door with a lantern while the travelers entered and Bruce carried in their luggage. Inside, a mesquite-root fire filled the room with eye-smarting, smoky warmth, and here Bruce first learned the names of his passengers.

The fat man, of the red lapels and nearly as red jowls, called himself Matthew Caldwell, hide-and-tallow buyer from New York. Besides his wife he had brought her maid, Molly. Hugh had a faint recollection of the name of Captain Emory Castle, the cavalryman, but no memory of his face, copper brown and Indian-sharp, or his gray eyes and lank black hair.

There was a third man, an ex-sailor who called himself Stub Shanahan. Shanahan was a tough, big-shouldered little man with a roll in his walk, as though he had a tossing deck beneath him. He wore a sailor's striped jersey under his old coat and a tasseled stocking cap. Inland, heading strangely farther from the sea each day, he explained himself by saying that he had inherited a silver mine near Monterrey and was planning to protect his interests while there was still a legacy left. Bruce thought, but did not remark, that Shanahan was pegging his mine somewhat higher than his life by entering Mexico at a time like this.

But it was Tom Manley who interested him most. A quiet man with a deep voice, he sat smoking his great calabash pipe by the fire while dinner was carried in, paying no more attention to Bruce McCarthy than if Bruce were a hostler. His portmanteau rested against a chair leg. Bruce swallowed and studiously avoided staring as he thought of the secrets it must contain.

Dinner being over, landlord Hogg assigned rooms. Caldwell had only glanced into his when he was back in the parlor, fuming.

"Dammit, Hogg, I can't sleep in such a hole!" he complained.

"What's wrong with it?" the host asked complacently. "Best bed in the house."

"The air, man, the air! Smells like a horse had died in there. The window is on the west, and the wind's from the east. I won't have it."

Tom Manley interrupted, rising. "I'll trade with you, Mr. Caldwell. I believe mine's across the courtyard."

Blinking, Caldwell muttered, "Why, that's decent of you, Manley. You understand—I can't sleep without a draft in the room."

Bruce went outside to the barn, where he was to sleep.

IT WAS after the tavern was all in darkness that Bruce heard boots cross the yard and saw a lean shape limned in the doorway. He sat up on his pallet, hand seeking the pistol he carried inside his shirt, thrust under his belt.

"Mr. Manley! That you?"

"It's me, McCarthy."

There in the dark barn they gripped hands for the first time. Tom Manley asked him, "Can you prove yourself?"

Bruce fetched out his credentials and Manley read, holding the paper in the faint wash of moonlight sliding through a window. He returned it. "I'll prove myself to you by asking you to keep this bag for me tonight."

The warm leather grip of the portmanteau was thrust into his hand, and Bruce stared down at it.

"But that's—it's the papers you brought from Washington, ain't it?"

"It is. But it's safer with you of nights than with me. I'm going to tell you something, Bruce—" Manley sat on the edge of a corn crib and fell into a frowning silence for a moment. "All's not as it might be. As careful as we were to keep my coming secret, there's been a spy on the boat all the way from New Orleans?"

"One of them folks in the tavern?"

"Yes. Which one, I can't say. I don't know any of them but that fellow Shanahan, and he's a scoundrel for sure. He's been in and out of jail most of his life. I'll give you odds he's running from a murder in the States, rather than hunting his silver mine. But I don't think he's got the brains to be a spy.

"And yet the bag was searched twice in

my cabin. I had taken the precaution of carrying the papers with me every minute, so nothing was found. It's a funny thing, but I don't think the spy knows which is his man, either. He can't know that it's me, because he hasn't a shred of proof. So I suspect he's gone through everybody's baggage in the hope of finding the man he must stop before we reach San Antonio."

With his knuckles, Manley rapped the leather case. "Talk about gunpowder—there's a hundred kegs' worth right in there. We're in the war, McCarthy. It ain't public knowledge yet, but it's gone past any diplomat's ironing it out. And—thank God—the U. S. will be fighting with us!"

BRUCE'S eyes gleamed, for this was the thing that he, with all Texas, had hoped for so long. The little Republic of Texas, hardly dry behind the ears, was not in a position to wage successful war with Mexico. She still carried the wounds of only ten years before. With U. S. help she could probably make it a quick war and a decisive one.

"There's maps in there showing we intend to strike first," Manley was going on. "Maps showing where we'll receive five million in gold from the States, in ten shipments. In a word, that bag is worth more than my life or yours or anybody else's. That's why we've got to bend over backward to be cautious. You'll keep on being a coachman, as far as anybody's knows. And I'm a rancher bound home for Eagle Pass. At Eagle Pass we'll leave the coach and ride hell-for-leather for the capital. Is that all straight?" Manley stood up.

"All straight, sir."

"Then, good night." Tom Manley went straight to the window of his room, and Bruce saw him step across the sill into the darkness. It was only a second later that Manley cried out and an overturning table made a crash in the silence. Almost immediately a man sprang through the window and was gone around the corner of the low-roofed mud building. But from Manley's room there was no sound of movement.

With fear like a drug in his veins, Bruce crossed the courtyard, rounded the corner and ran toward the corrals. Within the enclosure horses moved nervously. Close by the *ocotillo* fence crouched a smaller lump of shadow which had the look of a man. Bruce halted, his hand thrusting forward with his five-shot Paterson .34 at full cock.

"Who's that?"

The shadow seemed to break up. It stretched to lean, tough height, and it was moving toward him, with a glint of steel to be seen for a second.

"Get your hands up!" snapped Bruce. "I got a gun on you."

Flashing, a knife slipped through the air with the barest whisper. Bruce flung up an arm and ducked, but he was squeezing the trigger of the weapon at the same time. In the fire-flare he saw a Mexican in a *serape* and sombrero stumbling back, his mouth distorted with pain. There was a smear of blood on his cheek.

A sickness possessed him as, alone in the darkness, he looked down on his man and realized that he had killed him. While he stood there, doors began to slam within the adobe building and voices were raised.

Presently landlord Hogg showed in the doorway, holding above his head a whale-oil lantern. Seeing Bruce, he came across the yard with Matthew Caldwell, Shanahan and Captain Castle behind him.

The rays from Hogg's lantern made it horribly plain that the Mexican was dead. From the ground Bruce picked up the knife; he found in his sleeve a long rent, where the blade had grazed his arm.

Shanahan muttered, staring at the thief, "Drilled through like a kid on a spit!"

Hogg gasped, "What've you done?"

"Killed him, I reckon." Bruce spoke with a casualness he did not feel. "I heard somebody holler and seen this Mex jump out of a window. I followed him and he threw a pig-sticker at me. We'd best see what's happened to Mr. Manley."

Hogg shook himself loose from the grisly sight and followed Bruce's lean form. Manley was already on his feet when they entered his room. He had a wet cloth wadded against his temple, which was rosy with blood; his telescope bag was open and clothing was scattered about.

"Mr. Manley! What's happened?" Hogg peered up with concern into the tall man's face.

Manley lowered the cloth and a wicked bruise was exposed, the skin split from the force of the blow that had felled him.

"A thief," he said. "I surprised him pilfering my bag and he struck me before I

could see him halfway clear in the dark."

Matthew Caldwell glanced sharply from the bag to Tom Manley. "Do you always sleep in your clothes?" he asked.

A cold knuckle ran down Bruce's vertebrae as the logic of the question went home. And it was then, seeing the hide merchant's small eyes choked with suspicion, that he recalled the incident of Caldwell's being unwilling to sleep in this room. Bruce wondered whether this had been an ordinary thief he had killed.

NOT batting an eyelash, Manley replied, "I'd been out of the room. That's how he got in without my hearing him. It was stuffy in here and I was thirsty, and I went to the well for a drink of cold water."

"You had a pitcher of water in here."

Manley drove back, with a sharpness to his voice, "Are you my keeper, Caldwell? I said I wanted cold water—not stale, lukewarm water." Turning to Hogg again, he said, "Did the fellow get away?"

"Lord, no! This coach boy of yours dropped him with a bullet clean through the head."

"Handy with that gun, ain't you?" It was Captain Emory Castle speaking, his long face, with its high, sharp cheekbones, full of interest.

Bruce shrugged. "He knifed me. I had to kill him or get killed."

"You couldn't hold him at gunpoint till we got there? Most young bucks would think twice before murdering a poor *pelado* rustling up a few coppers."

Anger snapping in his eyes, Bruce retorted, "I told you he—"

"You said your name was Bruce McCarthy." Castle squinted one eye. "I've been trying to place you. I knew a Bruce McCarthy once, but that was ten years back. Still, you've got the looks of him on you. You wouldn't be Captain Bruce McCarthy's son?"

Bruce said, "Yes, I would," his eyes daring Castle to go any farther.

"Butcher McCarthy," mused the dragoon. "Led his company into a pocket in the Mexican lines that only a dozen came out of alive. I was one of them. I was there to hear his own men curse him and give him that name as they died, because he knew what he was leading us into before we rode up through the lines. So you're the Butcher's son—a chip off the old block."

He let his sleet-gray eyes rest on the Paterson under Bruce's belt.

Bruce's throat was tight.

"You can shut your mouth," he said in a queer, tight voice. "His men never named him that. They knew he savvied what he was doing. He had less chance than any of them of coming out alive, because he carried his own guidon. But he silenced the cannons that were tearin' the heart out of San Sebastian, and his doing it saved the town.

"It was yellow culls like you that named him 'Butcher,' because you were jealous, and you knew he'd come back a hero if you didn't smear him up with mud. But you needn't a' worried. He died a month later at Goliad. And whatever they call him, he was worth six dozen fancy-rigged lady killers of your breed any day."

Castle's hand drew back, but Tom Manley caught his wrist in a grip that made the cavalryman grunt.

"There's the matter of some forty pounds difference in weight," he said. "Suppose you wait here until he's more nearly your size. Then I suspect he'll be glad to take you on—to your grief."

"I'll take him on right now," said Bruce.

For a moment a crackling current of hate existed beween Tom Manley and Captain Emory Castle. Then Castle swore under his breath, jerked his hand loose, and strode out of the room.

To Hogg, Tom Manley said, "I'll be all right now. You'll be wanting to take care of the Mexican. Good night—and thanks to you, boy."

On his pallet in the barn, half-finished thoughts formed and broke in Bruce McCarthy's mind, and they were all colored with anger and worry. Emory Castle had only a share of those thoughts. As he finally found sleep, Bruce was still thinking about Caldwell's refusal to accept the corner room. Had he known there would be a visitor to that room?

CHAPTER TWO

The Black Friar

DURING the night black storm clouds rolled up from the sea, and by the time the coach left Hogg's Tavern the sky was a turgid mass of boiling grays.

A small rain was in the air, settling in droplets on the jouncing, varnished panels and on Bruce's face.

The coach wallowed across country that was like a washboard, with as many low spots as high; a thousand small streams had cut themselves gullies as they worked toward the river to the west, and in these shallow, muddy crossings enough water lay pooled still to splash the stage from box to boot.

The dense brush, a high tangle of smoke tree, mesquite and a hundred varieties of cactus, all equally wicked, was an effective curtain to guard their progress from curious eyes, but it was no protection against the ever-thickening mud. The wheels sank always deeper, and the six-horse team, straining against breast straps and chain traces, dragged the mud wagon more and more slowly.

At length the front wheels dropped into a hole with a suddenness which threw Bruce to his knees. From this slough all the tricks at his command failed to wheedle the big oaken wheels. Dropping to the road, into mud up to his knees, he squatted to inspect the trouble. And in this awkward position he froze, the black figure under a nearby smoke tree blasting every thought of the coach from his mind.

The face, half-obscured by a Dominican's cowl, was that of a Mexican: walnut brown, disfigured with the deep craters of smallpox, heavy with dark, suety flesh. Gross in girth, the body was monstrously large. Tom Manley, thought Bruce, could have stood up to this black friar and looked short and puny. Against the rusty black vestments, upon a huge belly, hung a crucifix a foot long, of hand-beaten silver. It dangled from a chain by which a man could be hanged.

Lifting his skirts, the Dominican came through the mud. "The mud is too much for your poor horses? Perhaps Friar Garganta can help," he said.

Bruce grinned, still inclined to consider the priest more specter than man. "You sure can, *padre*. But it'll take more'n the two of us to budge this hack. I'll rustle some gents out to help."

A leather curtain pulled back and Matthew Caldwell's head thrust out. "Boy!" he shouted. "Are we going to sit here all day?"

"We are unless you get down and help us through this bog."

"In that mud?" The merchant's heavy features wrinkled sourly.

"Would you rather wade in it a couple of rods or set in it till summer?" Bruce opened the door. "Reckon I'll need all four of you gents."

Shanahan's unpleasant, aggressive voice said, "Pull up your pants legs, Caldwell, and jump. Fine woolens and a big belly won't keep you from this job."

Caldwell growled some retort, and a moment later he was stepping with grimaces into the mire. Castle, Shanahan and Manley debarked behind him, stopping suddenly to stare at the black friar.

Shanahan started.

"B'God, it's a whale in priest's clothes! Who the devil—"

The friar pushed back his cowl from a head like a brandy cask. "I am Friar Garganta," he said, anticipating the question. "A humble Dominican trying to reach the church at San Elizario: If I can help, I am happy."

Something about him—a hypocritical quality in his smile, an unsaintly semblance of strong lusts unbridled, that seemed part and parcel of him—caused them to accept him somewhat slowly.

Bruce gave orders and put two men on each rear wheel and one on each front. With Friar Garganta, he piled onto the nigh rear wheel. His eyes bulged when he saw the great heel lifted from the mire, with much sucking of mud, by Garganta's hands alone. The coach creaked, rocked on its steerhide thoroughbraces, and slowly worked forward. The black friar pushed Bruce out of the way. Bruce stood back to watch the stage rise out of the hole that had captured it.

The iron rims found solid bottom under a foot of mud, and Bruce cried, "That gets 'er, gents!"

It was then, starting forward, that a bright flash drew his eyes to the mire and he saw Friar Garganta's silver crucifix lying besmirched in a wheel rut. Raising it, Bruce discovered that he held only the portion of the crucifix below the crossbar. He searched farther, and presently came up against Gargarta's huge boots, planted squarely before him. Looking up, he discovered that the black friar was watching him, fists on hips, brows knit.

would be a terrible blow to his pride.

Scott grinned at her incoherency. "I don't own the *Beacon*. My uncle, Whit Harmsworth, does. At present I'm one of his lowliest wage slaves. As for Andrew . . ." He shugged. "Is he a gossip column addict?"

"I don't know," Cecily said with a sigh.

"Seems to me there are a lot of things you don't know about your Big Moment," Scott observed. Then, as she looked offended, he changed the subject. "Well, in any event, this columnist has set the stage for our performance at the Jade Club."

Cecily's breath caught in her throat, and her worry about Andrew was lost in welling dread.

Scott looked at her keenly. "You don't have to go through with it, you know."

"Oh, but I do!" Cecily told him lifting her soft chin. "I've talked Louise into stalling off those men, promising her I would do something. She doesn't know what. She doesn't even ask. She is so frightened and heartsick that she's like a child, trusting blindly. I can't fail her."

"I'm beginning to wish I had never suggested the plan." Scott's eyes narrowed moodily.

"But you did, and this can't go on forever." She indicated the cheerful hotel lounge where they sat.

"No, unfortunately." He added. "What night do you suggest for the Jade Club try?"

The suddenness and directness of his question stunned Cecily momentarily. Every frightened nerve within her wanted to suggest a night next week, next month. Next year! But it was useless to postpone the inevitable, she reminded herself. Useless, and dangerous to Louise.

SHE FORCED herself to say evenly, "How about tonight? It will be easy for me to get away. Louise and Tom are going out, and Andrew has a stag dinner scheduled"

"Tonight!" Scott's voice echoed the frantic protest in her secret heart. Briefly, she hoped that he would veto the idea. But after a second of debate with himself, he said, "All right, if that's the way you want it."

Cecily's small hands clenched under the table cloth. With frightened eyes, she watched Scott call for his check. Then his hand was under her arm, and he was leading her outside. She trembled violently.

"Suppose we drive around awhile," he suggested, as he helped her into his small, business-like convertible.

She nodded wordlessly, fighting the fear that clutched at her throat chokingly. She was doing only what she had planned to do. She had known all along that the visit to the Jade Club must be made. It would be cowardly to weaken now, she told herself over and over.

In understanding silence, Scott circled the Capitol and rove slowly down the Mall, along which marble buildings rose ghostlike in the gathering spring twilight. The air was sweet with the scent of cherry blossoms, that made a drift of white against the shadowed green of Potomac Park.

Cecily drew a long quivering breath and felt tears sting her eyeballs. The beauty and peace of the scene, contrasting bitterly with the ordeal ahead, wakened a poignant, almost intolerable ache within her.

Unconsciously, she moved a little closer to Scott, who slid the car to a stop in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, and put his arm around her slim, trembling shoulders.

"You poor little scared kid," he whispered, holding her gently.

"I'll get over it in a minute," Cecily told him gallantly, burying her face in his shoulder to hide the tears that came in a rush.

"Don't get over it. Go on being scared. Give up the whole thing," Scott begged, his voice muffled as he laid his lips against the silky gold of her hair.

part of it was logic. They were only a half day's ride from the nearest Mexican village, and it was from such a village as this that the first attack on the border would be coming.

And he had not forgotten that he was Butcher McCarthy's boy, and that a lot of bigwigs in the army had told Sam Houston he would fail in this job just as they said his father had failed. Bruce touched with his fingers the gun under his shirt. But the touch of steel did not warm his blood.

Mark Dawson, factor of the post, stabled the horses in good hay and had supper ready in a matter of minutes: green chilis, *relleno* style, *enchiladas* afire with red chili sauce, pitchers of coffee and hot milk, a mountain of blue-corn tortillas.

Dawson was a wiry man of sixty, bald and brown as a penny. He was given to brandy in his coffee and ancient jokes at which his own laughter was an orphan sound. But he was a pleasant host and brought camaraderie to his table.

Over coffee Dawson said, "I hear the States may aid us if we go to war with them Mexes across the river."

Caldwell's tongue creased to grub around his gums. "May nothing," he retorted. "I had positive assurance before I left New York that help had already been sent. That a secret emissary is on the way with certain important papers. Why, he may even be traveling with us. Who knows?"

Bruce sat very still, and Tom Manley yawned. "You hear such tales."

Offended, Caldwell leaned forward. "I had enough faith in the source of the story to travel twenty-five hundred miles to scout Texas as a possible source of hide and tallow, now that the market will be safe. I'm not accustomed to taking a flyer on idle gossip."

Mark Dawson stood up, the good host smothering the flame. "A fine old wine to finish off with, eh, gents? I've the best cellar in Texas right under this room. Come along and pick your own poison."

Castle, the dragoon, leaned back in his chair. "Not on top of all that Mex grub," he said.

So the others went through the dusty casks and shelves of cobwebbed bottles. Friar Garganta, rumbling with the immense dinner he had consumed, chose a bottle of port. Dawson wiped dust from other dark-green bottles and held them to the light of a candle.

But Bruce stood in the shadows and looked, and an idea came to him.

WHEN he went up, the big dining room was empty. The silence was made deeper by the crackle of a log on the hearth. He went through the mud and the rain to the barn. At the threshold he halted, hearing a noise within. It was a mere scrap of sound, something like a sob or a cry, or it might even have been a muffled laugh. But when he looked inside he saw a man's figure and a woman's standing close together; the man was trying to pull he woman closer and she was struggling a little and laughingly pleading, in a voice that was petulant and teasing.

"Please, Emory! I'm a married woman!"

"Don't taunt me, Ellen," Castle said, and pulled her roughly against him. For a long while they were like one shadow.

Then the dragoon released her. "You can't love him," he said with bitterness.

"There are times when money is nice."

After a moment Castle murmured, "Perhaps, someday soon, I can promise—"

In the corral a horse nickered, and the sound caused them both to face the door.

Seeing Bruce, the captain strode forward with an oath. "It's that blasted—"

Bruce stood his ground. Ellen Caldwell came after the cavalryman, holding her long skirts up with one hand. She clutched his arm.

"Don't, Emory!" she said. "It would be the worst thing."

With his tough brown flesh stretched tight over the sharp bones of his long face, Castle looked like an Indian. "I reckon this is too good to keep, ain't it?" he breathed. "You'll have to go to Caldwell with this."

"It's your business and the lady's if you want to make fools of yourselves," Bruce told him. "All I want is to take up some slack in them thoroughbraces. Cussed mud's stretched them down to here."

He brushed past, lighted a coach lamp and stooped. He heard them talking, then heard Castle striding away. While he was digging at the mud, Ellen Caldwell came up behind him. Bruce looked up. She was smiling tightly, her face rosy in the lantern flame, her hair like brown silk washed in copper.

"You're a good boy," she said. He sat like a post, and she laughed softly. "It won't do any of us any good if you talk, will it? Captain Castle and I are just good friends."

"Sure," Bruce said. "Don't worry."

After she had left, he extinguished the lamp. He dug Tom Manley's portmanteau from under a buffalo robe in the boot. Carrying it beneath his packet, he returned to the dining room. The men, all but Captain Castle, were about the long table. Bruce's smile was forced.

"Well, she'll take us a few miles further, I reckon," he said. "I'll take you up on that wine, Dawson, if the offer's still good. Didn't think I'd be drinking any, but that cold rain gets into a man's bones."

Dawson shoved a candle toward him. "Pint ought to do a feller your size. And keep outa my Amontillado."

Bruce found a place behind a large whiskey cask where he could stuff the leather case without leaving so much as a corner showing. Then he chose a bottle at random and returned upstairs. He was breathing easier, now. If anyone got the idea of looking through the coach, he would find nothing.

Much later the group broke up. Friar Garganta, Tom Manley, Caldwell and Mark Dawson sought their rooms. Bruce brought the buffalo robe inside and spread it in the warmth of the fireplace. Almost immediately he was asleep.

Even more swiftly, it seemed, he came shudderingly awake. His ears still held the light patter of footsteps. But the glance he sent through the big room turned up nothing.

He was about to lie back when he saw the chunky form of Stub Shanahan cross the pale gray square of a window. Shanahan opened the wine cellar door. A moment later it closed behind him.

Bruce was out of his robe and treading across the dirt floor in a second. He had his gun in his hand when he opened the door and looked down the stairs. For a moment he thought he was seeing the love scene in the barn duplicated. But the cry of fright he heard was real, and the girl in this man's arms had hair that was as blue-black as the barrel of his gun.

Down the steps he went, shoving his gun away, and dragged Stub Shanahan back by the collar of his red-and-white jersey. Molly ran to the stairs and then stopped, facing them with the back of her hand against her mouth. A candle lay on the floor, guttering in its own tallow, and by this sickly light Bruce fired a blow to the point of the sailor's blue jaw.

Shanahan went back against a brandy keg; it rolled to the floor with a great clatter. He was back like a mastiff, not hurt at all by the blow. Knotted, his fists were the size of hams, and their impact against Bruce's head was as staggering. They seemed to come from all sides; some Bruce stopped and some he did not.

SHANAHAN fought with an unbridled fury. He had learned to fight in the salt water school, where death or disfigurement is the prize for the vanquished. Those blows Bruce slammed through to his face seemed not to find his sluggish nerve centers. He was a fighting dog who had the flavor of blood on his nostrils. He kept following, driving Bruce across the room into the wine rack, slugging him to his knes. There was immense strength in that squat body, strength and savagery.

The racing pulse of desperation pumping through Bruce's head was a drug that killed the pain of Shanahan's punishing fists—but it could not give strength. Bruce McCarthy saw the sailor's bloody face coming closer again, and he knew that if he could land one blow on that jaw with every muscle of his body back of it, he could still be the man who walked out of this room rubbing his fists. Gathering himself, he struck.

The blow seemed fast and accurate, to him. But Stub Shanahan easily ducked it. Then he straightened the boy with a blow that rattled his teeth in his head, that glazed the angry brown eyes. Now he was grinning, now easing off, for that one wild swing told him what he needed to know. He cocked, measured. But he didn't loose the blow.

Bruce was down. He had spent his last coin of strength and there was nothing to keep his knees from bending, nothing to keep his arms up.

Shanahan reached across him and took a bottle of brandy from a shadowy ledge. He knocked its top off on the stone and drank deeply. The rest he spilled partly on the floor, partly on Bruce, as he let his arm dangle.

"Damn gutter pup you!" he panted.

He paid no attention to Molly, standing near the stairs with one arm behind her. It was perhaps as well, for she held a quart bottle of port by the neck as her forebears had gripped a shillelagh.

With the sailor gone, Molly knelt beside Bruce.

With her help he sat up.

"What in thunder were you creepin' around down here for?" he muttered.

She said bitterly. "I was trying to hide. I was going to let them go on without me tomorrow. Mrs. Caldwell was in a temper tonight. She accused me of flirting with Shanahan. She made me sleep on the floor without a cover against the cold."

Bruce let her dab at the cuts on his face with his handkerchief. "We're two peas in a pod, us two. Two that nobody's got much use for. But you mustn't try such a thing again. In this country you'll find there can be worse things happen to a girl than having a hard mistress."

"I would be a poor make-out as a cook if I couldn't earn my way in somebody's kitchen."

"Someday, Molly, you will be mistress of my kitchen—and not for wages, either." Bruce said it defiantly, reaching for her hand and holding it tightly, not embarrassed this time.

There was a sound that both heard, coming from the deepest ruffling of shadows at the far end of the vault.

"A rat!" whispered Molly.

Bruce got to his feet, keeping his eyes on the spot. As he moved forward a second sound occurred that wanted no analyzing. It came from the top of the steps.

Matthew Caldwell's voice bellowed, "So there you are! Seeking your own level, eh? Two alley rats slinking off to the dark cellar."

He came down the stairs, a grotesque figure in nightcap and flapping flannel robe. Now something happened that neither he nor Bruce had expected. From the sooty gulf of shadow beyond the largest barrels, a bottle came whirling. Striking near the candle, still burning on the floor, it shattered. A wave of liquor slithered across the flame, and the room fell into utter blackness.

Bruce had no hankering to be in anybody's crossfire. He fell back, coming with a bump into Molly and dragging her to the floor with him against the racked bottles.

The silence was like deep soot, upon which the slightest sound was as startling as a streak of white. There was the creak of bootleather and Matthew Caldwell's heavy breathing, and then his cry, "Who is it?"

But the boots came on, unhurriedly.

Caldwell could be heard to mount two or three steps, and the footfalls increased their tempo.

Again Caldwell made his scared, plaintive demand.

"Who—"

The cry ended like the fizzing of a bottle when the cork is pounded home. Someone ran stumbling up the steps, and a heavy threshing was heard as a man fell.

Bruce shuddered, hearing a prolonged groan that lifted the short hairs on the back of his neck. Molly was pressed close against him, and she was shivering. After aching seconds, when the cellar was completely silent, Bruce disengaged the girl's fingers.

"I'll—go see," he said.

It was necessary to find the steps, to flounder across the lump of warm, inanimate flesh which blocked them, and then climb, fighting panic, to the dining room. Bruce found a candle and lighted it on a coal from the fireplace.

Before he went down again he stepped to the hall and shouted down it. "Mr. Dawson! Hell's broke loose!"

(Continued on page 106)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), of Fifteen Western Tales, published monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Fictioneers, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Harold S. Goldsmith, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1950. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County, Commission Expires March 30, 1952. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 2-49.

The State of Indiana took a lot from the Reno gang—but not nearly as much as the Reno gang took from the state of Indiana!

They knocked the engineer out with a pistol butt. . . .

BLOOD NIGHT

By FREEMAN H. HUBBARD

SEVEN grim-faced men, all armed with pistols or shotguns, crouched in the shadows beside the iron rails on a moonless night and watched the rain slant across the pale beam of an oil-burning headlight. They saw the light grow brighter as the passenger train rumbled in from the south

and jerked to a halt at the water tower. There was no other illumination save the dim glow of oil lamps in the engine cab. in the Adams Express car just behind the tender and in the three wooden-open-vestibuled coaches.

Before the wheels stopped turning, the fireman scrambled up the woodpile in the tender to let down the water spout. At the same time the engineer swung off, torch in hand, and began to lubricate his engine with a long-necked oilcan. A quick blow in the darkness knocked the torch from his hand. Then a pistol butt hammered his skull.

On that dark, rain-spattered night of Friday, May 22, 1868, occurred the first big scale train robbery. The scene was Marshfield, Indiana, a hamlet on what was then the Western frontier. Marshfield consisted of merely a railroad track, two or three log houses, a water tower, a little sawmill and a cord or so of wood neatly stacked for loading into the locomotive tender. The railroad was the Jefferson, Madison & Indianapolis, but no train stopped there except for fuel and water.

Two masked figures overpowered the fireman before he could start letting water into the tank. Another climbed into the cab. Someone pulled the pin from the coupling that linked the express car to the first coach. The stranger in the cab, who seemed to know how to run a locomotive, released the brakes and opened the throttle. The front part of the train, with hissing steam and clanking couplers, began to roll away.

But not without a fight. Back in the last car, Conductor Americus Wheeler heard a babel of voices. He rushed outside, drew a pistol and fired at the man who had just tampered with the coupling.

Someone barked, "This damn fool wants to get shot! Give it to him, boys!"

A fusillade of lead rang out. Wheeler dodged into a car, but a bullet in the knee dropped him to the floor. The engine, tender and express car moved northward, gradually picking up speed.

Dark figures on the ground raced after them and swarmed aboard.

Trains had been plundered before, during the Civil War, by guerrillas on the plea of military necessity, and there had been plenty of minor train robberies. But until the Reno gang appeared, there had been no important train stickup in peacetime. The Reno boys set the pattern.

The four of them—Johnny, Frank, Bill and Simeon—were described in newspaper accounts of the day as "fierce-hearted. dashing young fellows, all well built, handsome boys." A fifth brother, Clinton, known as "the honest Reno," had nothing to do with the freebooters. Neither had their slim, dark-eyed sister Laura. The four outlaws had begun their criminal careers as bounty jumpers during the war, but when the return of peace ended their income from this source they had turned to burglary. In time even the smashing of doors and cracking of safes failed to satisfy their craving for excitement and plunder, so in 1866 the four horsemen tried a new experiment, stopping a train on the Ohio & Mississippi to rob the express car. This venture made "The Reno gang" a name of terror throughout southern Indiana.

A few months later their ire was aroused by news that two newcomers, Walt Hammond and Mike Collins, had copied their technique and stolen about six thousand dollars from an O. & M. express car near their farm at Rockwood, Indiana. Johnny, oldest of the brothers and leader of the gang, demanded, "Are we gonna let these damn poachers get away with it?"

"No!" roared Frank, Bill and Simeon.

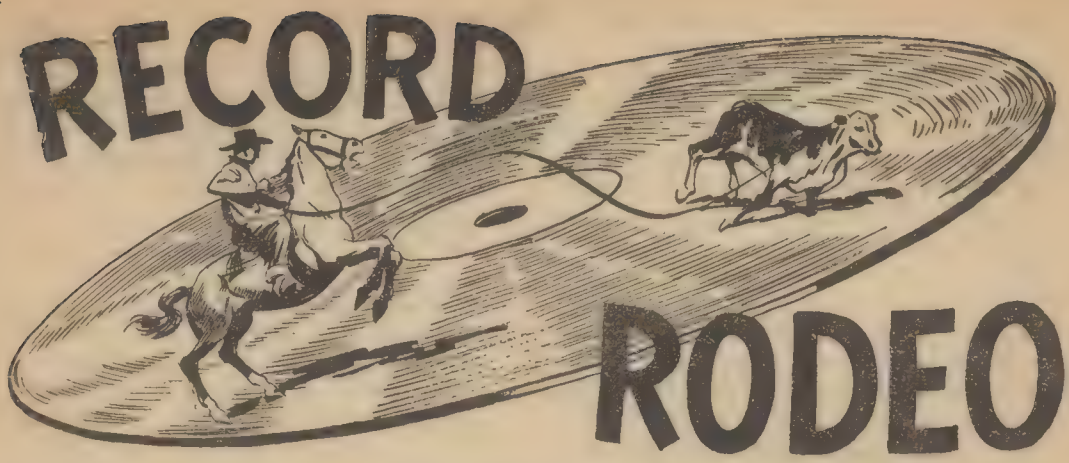
Mounting and spurring their fast horses, the Renos caught up with Hammond and Collins, seized the loot for themselves and smilingly helped to put their rivals behind the bars. It was Johnny's last triumph. Shortly afterward, Allan Pinkerton trapped the gang leader at a railway station, handcuffed him and dragged him aboard a waiting train. Johnny was sentenced to twenty-five years in the Missouri State Pen. Frank took over the leadership of the gang, and in 1868 three Renos and four confederates staged the Marshfield affair.

They ran the captured express car a few miles up the road, stopped, got out and surrounded it. Frank hammered on one of the locked doors.

"Open up," he snarled, "or we'll blow your head off!"

The express messenger, Tom Hawkins, ignored this threat. But the bandits smashed their way into the car with tools from the engine cab, knocked Hawkins out, and tossed him into a gully. Then from two train safes they collected a little over $97,000, mostly in greenbacks, some in Government bonds,

(Continued on page 102)



By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letter to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

HOWDY, ladies and gents! It's time once again to catch up with the latest in the field of Western melody. Step right up and look over the stock. We've got hoedowns, ballads, novelty items and romantic songs, a couple of new stars to introduce to you all and a lot to tell you about the recording activities of your old favorites. Let's get right to it. Keep your eye on chute number one—coming out is the gentleman from north of the border, Hank Snow!

HANK SNOW FAVORITES
HANK SNOW AND HIS RAINBOW RANCH BOYS
YOU BROKE THE CHAIN THAT HELD OUR HEARTS
NO GOLDEN TOMORROW AHEAD
WASTED LOVE
MY TWO TIMIN' WOMAN
SOMEWHERE ALONG LIFE'S HIGHWAY
WITHIN THIS BROKEN HEART OF MINE
(RCA Victor)

Ever since Hank Snow crossed the border from Canada into the United States through the medium of his RCA Victor records, dealers have been literally Snowed under with demands from Western music fans for an album by Hank. RCA Victor obliges with *Hank Snow Favorites* comprised of six of the "Singing Ranger's" own compositions. He delivers them with the understanding and feeling that only a composer can bring to his own work. Snow's relaxed, sincere serenading is accompanied by his own guitar and the backing of the Rainbow Ranch Boys.

MOUNTAIN BOYS HAVE FUN WITH MOUNTAIN GIRLS
NINE-TENTHS OF THE TENNESSEE RIVER
SPADE COOLEY AND HIS ORCHESTRA
(RCA Victor)

Spade Cooley, as fine a music maker as you'll find in a cactus clambake, applies his streamlined Western talents to two tunes as clever as their titles. He has Ginny Jackson singing of the virtues of the native Loreleis of the hills, who don't lack for charms or wiles in luring the Romeos of the rugged retreats. Hal Derwin asserts that it works the otherway too, and chimes in his assent at the end with a Mortimer Snerd "Yup." From comedy Ginny turns to tears on the coupling which is watered, she says by the "tears that I shed over you." Spade knows his mountains and rivers as well as he knows his swing, and this combination

makes for as hep a pair of hoedown harmonies as you're likely to treat your ears to.

JAW, JAW, YAP, YAP, YAP!
IT HURTS ME TO SEE YOU WITH SOMEBODY ELSE
TEXAS JIM ROBERTSON AND THE PAN-HANDLE PUNCHERS
(RCA Victor)

Big Texas Jim Robertson plunks his guitar and gives voice to the perennial plaint of the henpecked male on the top side. It's all tongue-in-cheek but very droll. Man forever succumbs to woman's wiles, Texas Jim intones, and the inevitable result of that is that "a woman can drive a good man nuts with her jaw and her yap, yap, yap." The Pan-handle Punchers assist on this one and on the pairing, a prairie lament called *It Hurts Me To See You With Somebody Else.*

GOODNIGHT IRENE
TEXANS NEVER CRY
GENE AUTRY
(Columbia)

The Pinafores and The Cass County Boys assist Gene in a lilting new version of this big hit, with Gene giving an admirably straightforward interpretation. On the reverse side, Gene tells about the breaking up of a romance, taking comfort in the adage of the title as he sings disarmingly against a tuneful Western string backing.

KEEP HIM SATISFIED
STREAMLINED GAL
LEON CHAPPEL
(Capitol)

Chappel is the composer of two songs, his second pairing for Capitol. He's tagged "The Louisiana hillbilly blues singer." Top side is in moderate tempo; second etching is brighter. They display the novel style which has made Chappel so popular.

WHAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS
THE LORD'S LARIAT
TENNESSEE ERNIE
(Capitol)

Top side is a spirited, religious song projected at a fast tempo. The other side, sung with equal fire, is an Ernie original. The Starlighters produce stirring ensemble work, along with fine instrumental assistance.

WHEN GOD CALLS HIS CHILDREN HOME
I CAN'T FEEL AT HOME IN THIS WORLD ANYMORE
HANK THOMPSON
(Capitol)

These sacred Western melodies were recorded in Dallas. Hank's tremendous following should eagerly accept both. His Brazos Valley Boys assist, along with a vocal group. Hank penned the top side.

JACKASS MAIL
CATFISH, TAKE A LOOK AT THAT WORM
SMILEY BURNETTE
(Capitol)

This is Burnette's first disk in the Western department, a departure from his kiddie field. He sings these, accompanied by Billy May's orchestra, with good humor, and is composer of both novelties.

TOO MUCH SUGAR FOR A DIME
SPOONIN' MOON
MERLE TRAVIS & JUDY HAYDEN
(Capitol)

Two bright, unique novelties in the Western field, with Merle and wife Judy dueting at their best. Merle wrote both ditties. The reverse side is the "Baby, It's Cold Outside" mood but in a hillbilly vein.

FADED LOVE
BOOTHEEL DRAG
BOB WILLS AND HIS TEXAS PLAYBOYS
(MGM)

The ol' master, Bob Wills, serves up two fine new sides for this release. The "A" offers a swell new Wills tune all dressed up in a performance that may very well be the start of a new style for Bob. The lyric is mighty appealing and, together with good vocal and instrumental handling (with a particularly outstanding fiddle solo) it works into something that gets right inside of you on first hearing. On the coupler, Bob and the Playboys offer a hot sagebrush riffer. The solos on this one are especially notable, with honors going again to that fiddle and to a bit of good bouncy piano.

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(Continued from page 98)

heedless of the fact that the bond numbers were kept on record.

Leaving the looted train about three miles from their home, they carried the swag over familiar paths to Rockford. There, according to legend, some of it lies buried today. Measured in terms of money, the Marshfield stickup was the biggest train robbery reported in the United States up to that time. The country was ablaze with fury; but the boys laid low, engaged in routine farm work with Clint and Laura, and watched the detectives waste time on a cold trail.

The first break came when a man trying to sell some of the stolen bonds at Syracuse, N.Y., was arrested and grilled.

"I bought these in good faith from Frank Reno and George Anderson," he protested. "I know nothing about the robbery except what I read in the newspapers."

Allan Pinkerton, who had nabbed Johnny and was familiar with the Renos, traced the two accused men to Canada, to the remote town of Sandwich in the Ontario farm belt. However, there was no way of extraditing them. Train robbery was such a new crime that it was not covered in the extradition treaty between the States and Canada.

Meanwhile, on July 10, 1868, the rest of the Reno gang, with some fresh recruits, made another bold move. They tried to hold up an O. & M. train at Brownstown, Indiana. But in some way news of the plot had leaked out in advance, and the desperados were stunned to find the baggage car heavily guarded. They beat a hasty retreat.

Three of their number were arrested later at Seymour and were put aboard a train running to Brownstown, the county seat. They never reached Brownstown. Enroute, the train was halted by a group of masked vigilantes who overpowered the guards and seized the three prisoners. A beech tree on a nearby farm served as a gallows. Nooses were placed around the outlaws' necks.

"If you know any prayers," said a hard, businesslike voice, "you'd better say them fast. You have just five minutes to live."

The gangsters begged for mercy, but at the end of five minutes were launched into eternity. A similar fate was meted to three other Reno men. All six were snatched from the hands of law officers and quickly lynched. Indiana was getting to be a very unhealthy place for train robbers.

BILL and Simeon Reno learned the gruesome tidings and sought to skip the country. Too late! Their pictures and descriptions had been posted far and wide; tempting rewards had been placed on their heads. The frightened brothers got no further than Indianapolis. There they were recognized and captured.

Up in Canada, Frank Reno and George Anderson were fighting extradition. They had been arrested on a charge of attempting to kill Conductor Wheeler at Marshfield. Paying their lawyers with stolen money, they resorted to one legal trick after another to obstruct justice. This case led to a revision of international laws to include train robbery among the extraditable crimes. Finally, on the solemn promise of the United States Government that the two prisoners would receive a legal trial, they were released by Canadian officials and sent to the New Albany hoosegow to join their pals.

Thus three of the Reno brothers—Bill, Frank and Simeon—were reunited under the same roof. A fourth, it will be recalled, was serving a stiff sentence in Missouri, which, incidentally, prolonged his life.

Preparations were made for a courtroom trial, but fate had a more sinister ending in store for the bandits. In the early morning darkness of Friday, December 12th, less than seven months after the Marshfield affair, a pitiless vigilante committee of about seventy men, all armed, made a six mile train journey from Jeffersonville to New Albany. Each man wore a red flannel mask.

The avengers fell into line as they left the train. Their first act was to cut all telegraph wires. Then, to insure still further that their plans would not be interfered with, they placed patrols along the main street leading from the station to the jail and threw a strong cordon around the jail itself.

Their leader, known only as "Number One," called upon the keeper to open the doors.

This demand was stoutly refused.

"Storm the jail, boys!" ordered Number One.

The guards opened fire; the mob fired back. A few minutes later the mob smashed the doors and poured into the building. They seized one guard, Luther Whitten, and roped him to a chair. Blood was flowing from a bullet wound in the right arm of Sheriff Fullenlove, who had been aroused

from bed and had slipped a pair of pants over his nightgown.

"Hand over your keys!" demanded Number One. "We want the keys to your cells before there's any more bloodshed."

Fullenlove refused.

"Then your wife will tell us where they are."

But Mrs. Fullenlove, who had just thrown a dressing gown over her sleeping attire and joined her husband, was equally courageous. The intruders ransacked the sheriff's office. Unable to find the keys, they turned toward the cell room.

A guard warned them away. "I'll shoot the first man who tries to force this door," he said from behind the bars.

The mob spokesman brandished a noose. "And if you do, we'll break down the door and string you up!" he replied.

At this, the guard capitulated. One by one the cells of the doomed bandits were unlocked. The last chapter of the Marshfield affair was written in letters of blood.

Simeon Reno, barefooted, scantily clad, was dragged shrieking and cursing from his cell. There was no mercy in the eyes of the red-masked avengers. Grimly they pounded him into submission and strung him up to an iron girder.

Next came Frank, no longer a gang leader. After a desperate battle for life, he too was knocked unconscious and hanged in the prison corridor, and his brother Bill beside him. The three swinging bodies cast weird shadows over the cell block. Behind the bars, men imprisoned on various charges cringed and trembled. But the mob's only desire that night was to wipe out the Reno gang.

The final victim, George Anderson, a gunman no less ruthless than the rest of the gang, begged for time to pray. This boon was denied. They left his body dangling on the end of a rope just outside the jail.

The New Albany necktie party took but a few minutes. Before leaving, the vigilantes locked the jail doors to keep the other prisoners inside, and Number One gave instructions for the care of the sheriff's wound. Then they silently marched back to the station and boarded a train, a train so secret that it bore neither headlight nor tail light. None of the lynchers was ever brought to trial for the crime of having taken the law into their own hands.

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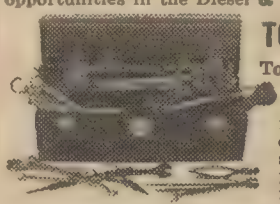

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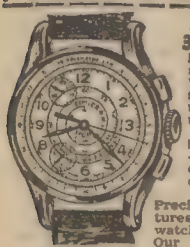

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It's Saturday and Tom is home, but we'll have a few minutes to talk before he gets dressed."

"I'll be right down," Cecily promised wearily, although she didn't feel like talking about last night.

She slipped nervously into a soft green knit suit. Her hands still shook and she felt depressed, weighted down by an unreasoning, mounting premonition that something dreadful was yet to happen, perhaps had happened while she slept.

Reluctantly she went down to the breakfast room to find her sister there and, to Cecily's relief, Tom Bradford. He had hurried his dressing, evidently, and was seated at the breakfast table opposite a glowing Louise. It almost made up for everything, Cecily thought as she greeted them, to see Louise so radiant.

Almost, but not quite. She was conscious of a dull empty ache in her heart, as she remembered that today would bring no Scott. He was gone. And with him was gone everything in the world that she wanted.

The knowledge came to Cecily blindingly, devastatingly, while commonplace life went on about her. In a daze, she slid into her chair and saw the maid bring in the morning newspapers and hand them to Tom.

"It's certainly surprising what a little successful shopping will do for a girl," Tom remarked humorously, nodding toward Louise before he scanned the headlines. "The wife looks like a million dollars worth of different woman this morning, doesn't she, Cec?"

Cecily evaded her sister's significant, warning glance, as the front door bell jangled imperatively. It sounded a little like Andrew's ring, but it might just possibly be Scott. Pray let it be Scott! It would be like him, Cecily thought, if he did decide to see her again, to choose such an hour as this.

Across the table, Tom uttered a short

neck. "You'll get splinters and a cold," Beau told her. "Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"No," she said. "I'm surprised it took you so long."

He gave her a reproving look, as if she knew more than she had any right to know, and laid the money belt on the table. "Is Sven woken?"

She nodded. "He hasn't been to sleep. Your going away fidgeted him more than losing that money belt."

"Well, I'm back," Beau said, "for a few days, maybe."

"Did you trade your horse?"

"No. I'm not so sure it was a good deal," he said.

"I'm sure it wasn't."

Beau looked at her again, wondering why she should be so sure. "You never saw the other horse," he told her.

"I've seen you," she told him. "And I've seen my father all these many years."

Beau shook his puzzled head. Sven came in, and Beau told them what had happened after he left town. "When it was all over," he ended up at last, "I had the moneybelt and there was nothing for me to do but come back."

"Sure," Sven said. "And you will stay?"

"Well," Beau said, grudgingly, "maybe a few days."

Sven nodded. "Fine. It will give us time to talk about going partners in this place. It is too much for me to handle by myself. And besides, there is some places I would like to go see sometime before I get old—" His voice drifted off and he gave Jenny a guilty look.

"You men," Jenny said with quiet indulgence.

"What do you think, Beau?" Sven asked.

Beau gulped. What Sven offered was more than he had hoped to reach in a long, long time, but the only answer he could manage was, "Of course, it would tie me down."

"Of course, but—" Sven left the words hanging there.

They had coffee together, and the sound of the clock up there on the wall racing to get nowhere filled the room. Beau found himself wondering when Sven would go to bed so he could find out all over again if it were actually true that Jenny got so—so excited.

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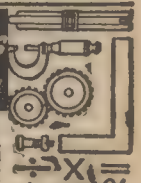

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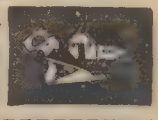

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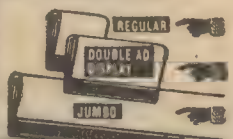

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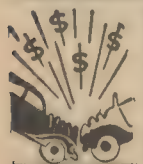

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(Continued from page 96)

CHAPTER THREE

The Trap Is Set

IT WAS Matthew Caldwell who lay in the cellar with his throat cut half through. Bruce ran past him and grubbed behind the barrel where he had hidden the portmanteau, near which the murderer had hidden. He found to his relief that it was still there, but for the present he dared not remove it.

In the red glow of a leaping fire they assembled—Tom Manley and Captain Castle, Friar Garganta, Shanahan and the two who had been ten feet from the hide merchant when he was murdered—Bruce McCarthy and Molly. Ellen Caldwell was in her room, fair prostrated, Dawson reported. Dawson, hating the job, had to act as a sort of coroner. The body reposed on a table, sheeted.

Dawson asked Bruce what he knew, and as Bruce talked he felt Castle's eyes upon his flesh like thumbscrews. He thought then of Ellen Caldwell, and the story he told did not include what he had seen in the barn.

Dawson poured and drank a stiff whiskey.

"You all claim you were asleep except them three," Dawson said. "Now, what's this trouble 'twixt you and McCarthy, sailor?"

Shanahan slumped in a rawhide chair with a bulge of tobacco in his cheeks. "That filly's been makin' me promises with her eyes ever since we left N'Orleans. I seen her go by my door tonight, and I thought—"

Bruce was on his feet, bruised face flaming. Dawson looked at him. "You set down. Molly, how about it?"

The girl's voice was dull. "I couldn't abide them any longer—Mr. Caldwell and the lady. I was going to hide down there until they gave up finding me and the coach went on. And then I heard Shanahan following me, and Bruce came after him."

"What'd you do after you left, sailor?"

"Went back to bed."

Friar Garganta's voice rumbled in the pause. "When a man's voice is cut, there is blood. You see, there is none on my hands."

He held out his coffee-colored hands. Dawson glanced at them. Then he inspected

the hands of the rest. On both Shanahan and Bruce he found dried blood, but their faces were cut and this seemed a logical explanation.

But the dragoon's drawl made Bruce's face burn. "Why not a little blood on the hands of a butcher's son?" he asked.

"That's enough," said Dawson sharply. "Don't condemn a man for his ancestors. There's nothing to be learned tonight, I can see. But you'll not travel until I ask some more questions and get some answers. Dawson's Fort will not be getting the name of a cut-throat hostelry while I can prevent it."

"That's impossible," snapped Captain Castle. "I have business in the capital."

"You'll have urgent business with my shotgun, if I catch you trying to leave." With that promise, Dawson left the room.

Bruce was finally left alone in the room with Tom Manley.

"What about it, McCarthy?" Manley demanded. "What were you holding back?"

Bruce grinned weakly. "You're a savvyin' sort, Tom. Well, I was trying to save a lady's good name. And I doubt she's worth it. I ran into Mrs. Caldwell and Captain Castle in the barn tonight, kissing."

Manley ground a fist against his palm. "That fellow Castle—I don't like him. Do you see what this could mean? He's getting a dragoon's pay, but he seems to have a banker's appetite. With Caldwell dead, he stands in a fair way to marry the widow and live high as the moon the rest of his life. Caldwell was a rich man."

"But how," Bruce asked, "could he have known Caldwell would be coming to the cellar to get himself killed?"

"Perhaps it was accidental—perhaps something else drew Castle down there. And of course Molly was the reason for Caldwell's blundering in. But it gave the man his chance.

"Well, we'll sleep on it now. For tonight we'll leave the papers where they are."

It was not until all was silent in Dawson's Fort, and the log on the hearth had relapsed into surging coals, that Bruce McCarthy thought of the black friar. Matthew Caldwell's throat looked as though it had been slit with a butcher knife. And the only man here who carried such a knife was the monk.

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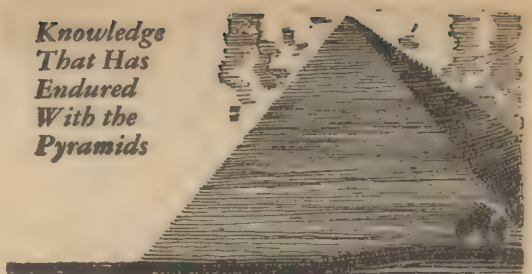

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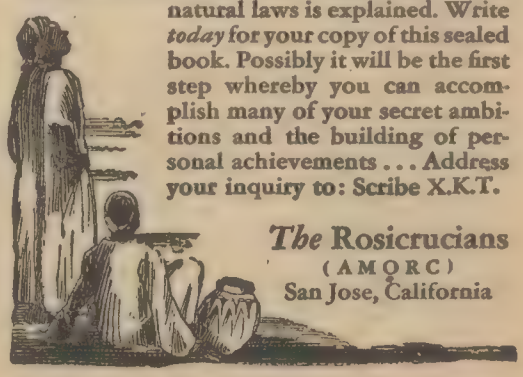

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BRUCE was out early in the cold drizzle, tending his horses. When he heard the rattle of crockery he returned to the post. Entering, he found all but Tom Manley at the table. The mouth-watering spice of *huevos rancheros* and coffee was in the air, but as he stood warming his fingers before the fire he saw that no one was eating.

Every elbow was on the table, all were leaning forward, and excited ripples of talk went back and forth. Dawson was the red-faced center of conversation.

"It's him, gents!" He struck the table with his fist. "Can't be nobody else. It was full of envelopes—done up real fancy, with gold seals and red ribbons and all. And all of 'em addressed to His Excellency, Sam Houston! His Excellency—that's a laugh! Old Sam's as common as you or me; he's drunk brandy by the quart right here in this room."

"You found it behind a cask, eh?" That was Stub Shanahan, his eyes varnish-bright.

Dawson glanced at the brown leather portmanteau, laid on the table before Tom Manley's empty chair. "Yes, sir! I took a lantern down and was grubbing about for the killer's knife, or whatever I might find. And I found—"

A ramrod might have been threaded down Bruce McCarthy's spine, he stood so rigidly straight. His gaze was not for the briefcase now; it was for Tom Manley, who stood in the entrance.

Manley walked over and stood behind his chair. He looked at the portmanteau, then at Dawson. Dawson flushed.

"Sorry I busted into your secret, Mr. Manley. You see, I didn't know who the thing belonged to, or why it was there. After I opened it—well, we none of us dreamed we was standing so close to Sam Houston's right-hand man! I guess I wasn't the man to keep such a secret."

In some reserve of coolness, of steadiness, Tom Manley found a smile. "That's all right, Dawson. You left everything intact?"

Dawson assured him he had. Then there was a barrage of questions which Tom Manley let bounce off him as he began to eat. At last he looked up.

"Consider yourselves lucky that you stumbled onto this much of the story. Naturally I can't tell you any more."

But there was avid curiosity in the greasy, unshaven face of Friar Garganta, in the gray-steel eyes of Emory Castle and in the blunt, sullen features of Stub Shanahan.

After breakfast Manley went to his room. Bruce followed when he could do so without being seen. Manley was seated on the broad mudwindow sill, smoking.

"I failed you," Bruce said bitterly. "I'm no better'n they said I was."

"An accident like that can happen to anybody." Manley took the pipe from his lips, and his eyes were just as sober, his smile just as easy. "I'm glad it's happened. I'm afraid the net was already closing around us. Now the initiative is ours. It must be, or we'll go the same way Caldwell did. How far is it to San Antone?"

"Farther than we could run for."

"Not if we use our heads. He's been stalking us. Now we're going to flush him out in the open and deal with him just as he would have with us. Can you put a saddle on any of your horses?"

"All of 'em will take a saddle. That's why I picked 'em."

"You rig up a couple right away. And lash my case on well. We're leaving in ten minutes."

The saddle room gave up two ancient Mexican saddles with *cabezas* as big as dinner plates. Bruce had one horse saddled and was grooming mud from the second when Molly came into the barn. She carried a small bundle done up in a piece of gingham.

She watched a moment, looking forlorn and frightened. "You're leaving!" she said.

Bruce grinned, mimicking her brogue. "It's leavin' I am—you bet!"

"I'm going with you!"

His smile vanished. Standing, he held her by the elbows. "We'll be riding far and fast. We may have balled lead to spur us. Do you think I'd take you on such a ride?"

The girl's blue eyes filled. Quite easily, Bruce's arm slipped about her. Then he heard Tom coming.

"Molly!" he whispered. "You just stay with the old battleaxe a while and keep writing to let me know where you are. Some day this will all be finished and we can think about ourselves. When I get some money I'll send it to you and you can leave her. This is Texas, and we don't savvy slaves or

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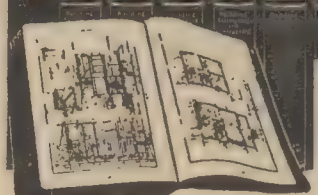

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redemptioners. She can't hold you. Will you wait for me, Molly?"

"I'll wait!"

They were standing that way when Manley entered. He gave them a sharp, close look.

"We—we were just sayin' good-by," Bruce said.

Manley threw blanket and saddle on the second horse. "If you're done, we'll be getting on."

IT WAS all he said, but Bruce left the girl and picked up the reins of his horse. Manley finished saddling and they walked their horses out of the barn and through the gate in the stout adobe wall.

An hour they rode, and Bruce looked back and spoke sharply to Manley.

"There's somebody trailin' us! Two of 'em, by golly!"

Manley didn't look back. "I figured they wouldn't let us get far. We'll find a nice spot to hole up in and have it out with them."

They continued to ride until Bruce reckoned they were within accurate rifle shot. Here a narrow side canyon made a notch in the palisade.

"Best find us a spot," he said. Tom Manley's casual acceptance of the fact that they were about to make a gamble for their lives was somewhat heartening. "This canyon looks likely," he said.

Manley untied his portmanteau as they pushed up the rock-and-mud-choked canyon. Not far from the river there was a nest of boulders with a patch of choke-cherry to screen it. Manley dismounted and went into this with the briefcase under his arm and his seventy-caliber rifle in his hand.

They waited. Bruce McCarthy had no rifle, but he had the five-shot Paterson that had been his father's. *Butcher McCarthy's gun*—the thought was stimulating.

It was taking longer than it should for the pursuers to catch up, unless they had seen them leave the trail and were being cautious. Time drew out like a tight wire, and Bruce's nerves were at the same pitch. Then Captain Emory Castle rode into the notch of the canyon and looked up.

Manley laid his cheek against the gun stock. Castle came ahead. Bruce waited to

see the second man, and apparently Tom Manley was waiting for the same thing, for he let Castle draw to within a hundred feet before he made his challenge.

"I've got you in my sights, Captain," he called. "Keep coming, but drop your rifle."

Several things happened then, all in one explosion of action.

Castle spurred, lay over in the saddle and kicked his left foot free, so that the pony's lunge pitched him off and the horse's body was a shield for him. The canyon walls thundered with the sound of Tom Manley's shot, but it only chopped a piece out of the rawhide-covered saddlehorn.

"Damn me for a blundering fool! That wasted shot may cost us something."

A shot snapped back at them from the boulders. It burned the air between them and they ducked.

There were several minutes of this snap-fire-and-duck warfare.

It ended when Captain Castle called over to them, "Do you value your life less than those papers, Manley?"

"Much less," Manley replied.

"Then you'll probably want to stay right where you are. Because in a few seconds the good Friar Garganta will have that boulder ready to move, up yonder."

Both Manley and Bruce twisted over on their sides to look aloft. On the cliff top a hundred yards above they saw a great, poised headstone of rock shift on its pivotal base. A small cascade of pebbles and dirt rattled down. Some of the pebbles were not so small. They stung and bruised.

Bruce breathed hard, his mind numb with the realization that this was defeat. Surrender or fight, it was trail's end.

"It's too bad you're such a confounded loyalist," Castle remarked. "If you'd just walk out without your guns, we could let you go free. Of course you'd lose the papers, but then you'll lose them anyway. It would save us having to dig them from six feet underground."

TOM MANLEY, his face seeming old and lined, remained silent. Bruce saw him glance his way, once.

The dragoon spoke again. "All right, Manley. I'm going to give that signal."

"Hold up." Manley slowly got to his feet, his hands high. "All right, Bruce," he said.

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"It's all very well to die a hero, but it's the live ones who serve their country, not the dead. We did our best. We cannot do better by committing suicide."

Bruce discarded his gun and stood up.

Castle waved his arm in a slow signal. For the moment he made no move to get the portmanteau. He sat on a flat rock with his revolver on the pair until Friar Garganta, puffing and blowing, came waddling down the canyon.

The monk himself picked up the leather case, stooping with a grunt to raise it. He put the ponderous silver crucifix to his lips, in a mock gesture, murmuring, *"Grac' a Dios!* I will remember you when I count my beads, *caballeros."*

"Thanks," Manley said. "You did seem to like your wine overmuch for a priest. I wish I'd carried the reasoning further. I suppose you are no less than a *coronel?"*

"A mere *capitan*. But you shall hear of Captain Corrales in times to come."

"I'm afraid not," Captain Castle said, and his voice held what seemed real regret. "You've been of the greatest help. But the gold, *padre*—what would there be left for me, if I had to share it with the whole Mexican army?"

Garganta looked at the gun in the dragoon's hand, knowing the ball beneath the firing pin was meant for him. His brown face glistened with perspiration.

"Fifty thousand pesos!" he wheezed. "A hundred—"

The gun jumped in Castle's hand. Across the body of the false priest, Castle looked into Tom Manley's face, seeing the horror and disgust there.

He recovered the portmanteau, and Bruce saw that his face was sallow, that his lips were trembling.

"Perhaps I'm not the deep-dyed traitor you think," he said. "I promise you none of your military papers shall go into Mexico, unless Texas refuses to pay my price for them. You can tell Sam Houston it will be two hundred thousand dollars, American, when I am ready to sell. And of course I mean to have the gold shipments from the States. Texas paid me for my services ten years ago with a handful of land script and a bullet wound. This will cancel the debt."

With a glance of assurance inside the

portmanteau, he retrieved their guns, caught his horse and rode down the canyon.

Not until his hoof rounds died away did Bruce relax. "Let's find them horses and get back to Dawson's!" he said. "Before he opens up that satchel."

Manley frowned. "He already checked on that. I saw the envelopes myself."

Bruce patted the leg of his right boot. "Sure, he got the envelopes. But I took out all the papers while I was saddling and stuck them inside my boot."

Manley couldn't speak immediately. "Bruce McCarthy," he breathed, "I was thinking you were a poor catch of a guide, to get me into a blind alley like this. But you've got more brains and fight than a dozen army men I could name."

"Brains!" Bruce said scornfully. "I let him get away from us, didn't I?"

"We haven't lost him," said Tom. "I think the scoundrel really wants the Caldwell woman. I believe he murdered her husband simply to free her. So she will be watched, and when he returns for her, we will have him.

"Or perhaps we'll catch him even before that. He's cast his lot with Mexico, for he can never return to Texas. When he learns his mistake, I don't doubt but that he'll serve against us, for there'll be no one to tell what happened to Friar Garganta. We'll meet him again."

"Maybe you will, but not Butcher McCarthy's son."

Manley struck him on the back, heartily, reassuringly. "There will be another tale told about Butcher McCarthy, and I shall tell it. You've proved your dad's courage all over again. Perhaps, Bruce, you'll be the youngest lieutenant in the Texas Dragoons after I've spoke up."

In silence they rode, a warmth rising through Bruce.

"Tom," he asked at last, "how much pay does a lieutenant get?"

Manley smiled. "Not much, I'm afraid. But if you're worrying about how you're going to marry that girl of yours after the war, I wouldn't fret too much. There will be something coming to you for the job you've done. Does that answer your question?"

Butcher McCarthy's boy reddened. "Yes, sir," he said. "I reckon that answers it fine."

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